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A VIEW FROM BELOW: TRADITION, EXPERIENCE AND NATIONALISATION  
IN THE SOUTH WALES COALFIELD, 1937 - 1957

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Submitted for the degree of Ph.D

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May, 1979.

## CONTENTS

### Volume One

Map One: the South Wales Coalfield  
Introduction.

#### Part One: The Background.

Chapter 1	: Sectional Strikes and Union Discipline.	1
Chapter 2	: Visions of Slavery.	23
Chapter 3	: Coming to Terms with the Powell Duffryn Company.	51
Chapter 4	: Victimization, Accidents and Disease: the subjective lessons of class conflict.	103
Chapter 5	: The United Front: a political response and a continuity.	171

#### Part Two: The War Years.

Chapter 6	: 1939-1942.	194
Chapter 7	: 1942-1944.	258
Chapter 8	: Tareni and Penrhiwceiber.	355
Chapter 9	: Normality Almost Returned: 1944-1947.	387

### Volume Two

#### Part Three: Realignments.

Chapter 10	: Nationalisation: old piss in new pots?	2
Chapter 11	: Divided Welshmen: Marshall Aid and the strikes of 1947-1950.	55
Chapter 12	: Unofficial Leadership: orders from the Shakespeare Hotel.	169

#### Part Four: The Disappearing Millenium.

Chapter 13	: Speeches at the Pit-head Baths.	262
Chapter 14	: Old Divisions and New Alliances.	321
Chapter 15	: Conclusion.	388

Appendix One: Maps - locations of relevant coalmines.

Appendix Two: The Organization and Ownership of the South Wales Coalmining Industry, 1926-1947.

Bibliography.

I extend the greatest thanks to Professor Royden Harrison for taking a risk and for his wise guidance and patience; to Doctors Tony Mason, Hywel Francis and David Smith for their constant advice and encouragement; to Bill Paynter, David Francis, Glyn Williams and Tommy Howells - all of whom provided invaluable personal accounts of the events described; to Clancy Sigal and Virginia Spate for attempting, unsuccessfully, to promote a little elegance in my writing-style; to my parents for their unflagging support (and for brainwashing me at an early age and for suffering for it ever since); to my brother Adrian for the hammering he gives my romanticism and to Lee for the days he spent in the Aberdare Library; to Mike and Jenny Woodhouse and Wayne and Lin Powell, for making Cambridge habitable and to Jane Perryman for being Jane Perryman and sometimes Jane Howells.



VOLUME  
ONE

## TABLE OF CONTENTS: VOL.1

Map One: the South Wales Coalfield.

Introduction.

### Part One: The Background

Chapter 1	: Sectional Strikes and Union Discipline	1
Chapter 2	: Visions of Slavery	.
	i. Unemployment	23
	ii. The Mines	27
	iii. The Owners	30
	iv. Images of Conspiracy	33
	v. The Means Test	39
Chapter 3	: Coming to Terms with the Powell Duffryn Coal Company	51
	i. The 1938 Investigation	58
	ii. Wages and Grading of Mineworkers	61
	iii. Arbitrary Price Lists and the Fixing of the Stent	65
	iv. Nourishing the Seeds of Sectionalism	69
	v. "Rationalisation" and the Erosion of Lodge Rights	79
	vi. The Bwllfa Disputes	84
Chapter 4	: Victimization, Accidents and Disease: the subjective lessons of class conflict	99
	i. Victimization	103
	ii. Accidents and Disease	112
	iii. Funerals	122
	iv. Pneumoconiosis: the statistics	163
Chapter 5	: The United Front: a political response and a continuity	171

### Part Two: The War Years

Chapter 6	: 1939-1942	194
Chapter 7	: 1942-1944	.
	i. The Boys' Strikes and the Calls for a Second Front	258
	ii. Problems of Under-production	282
	iii. Expressions of Frustration	348
Chapter 8	: Taroni and Penrhiwceiber	355
Chapter 9	: Normality Almost Returned, 1944-1947	.
	i. The Porter Award Strikes	387
	ii. The Election of a Labour Government	425







## Introduction

This thesis attempts to place a halt sign before the glib generalisations which so frequently are employed to describe what are termed "traditionally militant" workforces. It focuses on the mines and communities of the South Wales coalfield during the period 1937 to 1957 and examines the way in which issues at the coalface combined regularly with an inherited and often unique set of local circumstances to confound the directives and analyses of the central executives of the political parties and of the trade unions. It concerns itself primarily with the symbiotic relationship which existed between the politics of the pit and those of the miners' elected leaders.

The work is divided into four chronological parts. The first sets out to construct an image of the coalmining industry in South Wales as it attempted to recover from the enormous setbacks which it suffered during the market depression of the early 1930s. The second deals with the war years and their immediate aftermath; the third with the onset of nationalisation, and the fourth with the years of Conservative government from 1951 until the sharp downturn in the demand for coal in 1957/58.

The records of the South Wales miners' lodges and those of the union's area and national executives provided my main sources of information. These were greatly supplemented by the detailed reports of the Ministry of Labour's Industrial Relations Officers as well as by the political and industrial columns of local and national newspapers and trade journals. Much valuable material was found amongst the mass of information published by the National Coal Board after 1947 and, wherever possible, I have made extensive use of the large and growing collection of tape-recorded oral testimony housed at the South Wales Miners' Library in Swansea.

## Chapter One

### Sectional Strikes and Union Discipline

In his autobiography, the ex-president of the South Wales miners, Bill Paynter, takes pains to stress his lifelong opposition to those amongst his union's members whom he terms "sectionalists". Sectional strikes, he argues, "encourage the philosophy that individual and sectional interests transcend those of the mass." Such strikes, he declares, are opposed to everything necessary for the "advance of socialism".<sup>1</sup> Similar sentiments had frequently been expressed by his two predecessors as president, Arthur Horner and Alf Davies. All three of them attempted, during their terms of office, to eradicate sectionalism on a coalfield which offered near-perfect conditions for its growth.

Unofficial, or "sectional" strikes by relatively small groups of miners were commonplace in South Wales during the first three decades of this century. No-one, except the strikers themselves, seems to have had much that was good to say about them. The coal-owners, whenever they deemed it possible or worthwhile, punished unofficial strikers by fining them, sacking them and sometimes by blacklisting them. (see Chapter Four) Generally speaking, such strikes were accepted for what they were - namely, tried and tested methods of pit-bargaining. There was rarely any great moral issue attached to their incidence. The coalowners might complain bitterly that such strikes were in flagrant breach of contract and even that they were organised upon occasion by left-wing agitators. But they were not imbued with any mystery as to their motivation. They were generally interpreted as constituting an

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1. Will Paynter, My Generation, London 1972, p. 157

obvious and convenient response to the activities of management in an industry which was particularly susceptible to swift changes of circumstance at the point of production.

By 1947, however, all of this had changed. As if it had been struck by some religious blight, the easy moral justification of the unofficial striker was found to have withered and been replaced by a more puritanical code of industrial righteousness, the virtues of which were preached, not only by the new coalowners, but also by the miners' elected leaders who were heard to declare that unofficial strikers offered an even greater threat to the continued existence of the reforming Labour government than did the editorial board of the Daily Mail. In their speeches, "sectionalism" became a synonym for "reaction" and, within months of the state assuming control of the mining industry, union members witnessed the spectacle of the Daily Mail's editorial board using the words of Will Lawther, the president of the National Union of Mineworkers, to denounce unofficial strikers. Lawther was quoted as accusing them of "acting as criminals at this time of the nation's peril" and he invited the Coal Board to prosecute them - "to issue summonses against these men, no matter how many there may be. I would say that even though there were 100,000 on strike."<sup>2</sup> Likewise, Arthur Horner was reported as describing these "unofficials" as "an alien force" and he advocated that they be treated as "an enemy of the true interests of the majority of the miners of this country."<sup>3</sup>

Such allegations provoked shouts of "betrayal" from some quarters of the union. Lawther and Horner were accused of hobnobbing with the sleeker members of the Coal Board - an accusation

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2 Daily Mail, 29.8.47.

3 Daily Herald, 28.8.47.

which was echoed in a Daily Mirror report on the dispute at Grimethorpe Colliery in September, 1947: "How they (the miners) hate the Divisional Officers of the Board! Big salaries, big cars, big offices, big titles - but they don't go down the mines."<sup>4</sup> The Star reported a Grimethorpe miner as claiming that Horner "seems to have forgotten that he is our servant and is acting as if he were our lord and master. We pay him to fight our battles and not to fight against us."<sup>5</sup>

Both the press and the strikers' spokesmen were aware of Horner's vulnerability on the issue of industrial militancy. His reputation rested upon his track-record as a leader of one of the country's most militant workforces - that of South Wales. Along with a handful of fellow executive members of the South Wales Miners' Federation, it was he who had encouraged the reformation and growth of rank-and-file organisations such as the so-called "workmen's combine committees"\* and it was he who had welcomed the use of the "stay-down" strike\*\* as a devastatingly effective industrial tactic. By 1948, unofficial combine committees - based upon those which he had helped to revive during the previous

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\* Large coal-owning conglomerate companies - such as Powell Duffryn and Ocean - were known throughout South Wales as "combines". The workmen's "combine committees" were formed by the employees of these companies to enable them to co-ordinate union activity in all of the pits owned by a particular coal combine.

\*\* See David Smith "The Struggle Against Company Unionism in the South Wales Coalfield, 1926-1939." Welsh History Review, June, 1973, for an account of the first wave of stay-downs on the coalfield. The term is self explanatory: a tightly-knit group of miners would refuse to surface at the end of a shift. The mine-manager was then legally required to halt mining operations until the men left voluntarily or else were removed by force.

<sup>4</sup> Daily Mirror, 6.9.47.

<sup>5</sup> The Star, 9.9.47.

decade - were held to be responsible for organising the most serious of the post-nationalisation strikes, and the use of the "stay-down" had become almost commonplace.

Horner found himself in the invidious position of having to outlaw these committees and stay-downs. The irony of the situation was not wasted upon the more astute of his critics. In September, 1947, for example, one of them wrote to the Daily Worker (13.9.47) pointing out how closely Horner's criticisms of the strikers resembled those used during the inter-war years by the Communist Party (of which Horner was a member) to denounce the likes of J.H. Thomas.

The comparison must have hurt Horner. And justifiably so, for in no way was he acting inconsistently. Unlike most leading Communists, he had always advocated that industrial militancy be expressed through "constitutional" union channels - even during the years 1929-1931 when the Communist Party promoted the formation of alternative union organisations as part of its Class Against Class political strategy. His hostility towards the strike-proneness of the revived "combine committees" after 1947/48 was not dissimilar from that which he directed against the breakaway "Company" or "Non-Pol" unionists during the inter-war years.<sup>6</sup> His favourite slogans had always been those which advocated Unity. He consistently drew away from those which encouraged sectionalism - whether they were coined to support the industrial organisations of the Right - like the Company unions - or those of the Left - like the post-nationalisation "combine committees".

By the early 1950s, the revived combine committees were regarded by the NUM executive in South Wales as perhaps the most dangerous of a whole range of unofficial actions then disrupting

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6 D. Smith, op. cit.



production on the field. Will Paynter, president of the South Wales miners, told the union's annual conference at Porthcawl in 1956 that such action was growing and that it was weakening the union's fight for vital and major reforms: "Any semblance of unity within the miners' lodges" he declared, had been "completely destroyed". Elected leadership was being ignored and "the general interest of the miners, union organisation and policy counted for nothing, the selfish interest of the few being regarded as paramount." He urged the miners to "back the union and abandon unofficial action."<sup>7</sup>

The animosity displayed by Horner and Paynter towards these unofficial actions can only be understood when viewed within the context of the two decades which preceded nationalisation. Put quite simply: the peculiarly traumatic nature of the South Wales experience during the 1920s and '30s moulded the political and industrial philosophies of both men. It is entirely inadequate simply to state that both men were Communists and that their attitudes towards unofficial action were governed by their willingness or unwillingness to toe the Communist Party's line on such actions. Both men, in very different ways, found themselves forced to modify and adapt their socialist principles in the face of a succession of desperate situations which began with the crippling defeat suffered by the Miners' Federation as a result of the 1926 Lockout. The problems faced by the Federation in the years which followed were compounded by mass unemployment amongst its membership, by widespread social deprivation and by the growth of "Company" unionism and non-unionism within the pits of a number of the coalfield's leading "combines".

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7 A. Horner, Incorrigible Rebel, London 1960, pp. 166-167.

Such was the cumulative severity of these experiences that, in certain of the more productive areas of the coalfield, the principal concern of union activists during these years became that of attempting merely to ensure the continued existence of even the most token forms of effective trade unionism. It was this concern which coloured all of the subsequent actions of the generation of miners' leaders which experienced it. The disintegration of the South Wales Miners' Federation following the defeat of 1926 and the subsequent proliferation of non-unionism and "Company" unionism were sufficient to give any elected official advocating "unity" a permanent psychological aversion to disjointed, piecemeal action. It was an aversion which reflected itself clearly during the years of the second World War and their immediate aftermath - years during which the miners' union became involved in a range of activities and alliances which previously it had spurned and which called into question a number of wide-ranging problems concerning the relationship of trade union leaders to their membership and to their members' employers in a capitalist society.

These activities and alliances were connected with the increasing pressure placed by government upon the union's officers to play a more active role in promoting higher standards of industrial output and discipline amongst union members. Miners leaders were requested, for example, to instigate campaigns designed to help rid the pits of wilful absenteeism - campaigns of the sort which previously had been led by colliery owners and managers. They were asked to condemn and to discipline miners who persisted in taking unofficial action in pursuit of industrial claims. Some of the leaders carried their enthusiasm for their

new task to extreme lengths. Arthur Horner relates, for example, how James Bowman, in an effort to promote production, forgot, for some hours, that he had been an executive member of the Miners' Federation for many years and imprudently attempted the kind of task normally carried out only by those members of the union who actually descended the pit every day:

"Most of the miners' leaders", recalled Horner, "made it their business to keep as closely as possible in contact with the men, and Jimmie Bowman, as a result of too much enthusiasm in this respect, nearly lost his life. In one of the Northumberland pits, Jimmie's district, the young men responsible for the trams went on strike because they said the complaints about the water in the roadway had not been taken care of. Jimmie went up there and made a long speech about the men fighting with the Red Army, the Eighth Army and the Northumberland Fusiliers. But few of the youngsters who were on strike would even come to the meeting and so Jimmie went across to talk to them. One of the boys said to him, "If the Red Army or the Northumberland Fusiliers knew what was going on here, they would be back here to fight for us." Thereupon, Jimmie went down the pit, stripped down and started work with some of the boys who had stayed at work. He got the water pumped away, and finally got the rest of the boys to resume. After that, he was in bed with pneumonia for a long time and very nearly lost his life."<sup>7</sup>

The story of Bowman is a good illustration of the rift which seems to have widened, increasingly after the wartime introduction of Dual Control<sup>\*</sup>, between certain full-time union officials and large numbers of working miners. Bowman and others like him were in almost

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\* i.e., the introduction of the Coalmining Undertakings Control Order on June 13th, 1942. The Government announced that it had decided to "assume full control over the operation of the mines, and to organise the industry on the basis of national service."<sup>8</sup> But, as a recent historian has explained, "this formula of 'operational control' left the owners in charge. The manager of any individual pit, still paid by the owners, could refuse to execute any order which he deemed incompatible with its safety, and in practice most demands which the owners did not like could be resisted on such grounds."<sup>9</sup>

7 A. Horner, Incorrigible Rebel, London 1960, pp. 166-167.

8 Coal, Cmd, 6364 (HMSO, 1942).

9 Angus Calder, The People's War, London, 1971, p. 501.

daily contact with the government's appointed production officers, with "interested" M.P.s and even with Ministers concerned with production. They were made aware on a personal basis of the importance to the nation of sustained increases of production in the pits.

The average miner, meanwhile, continued to work in the same pit, probably at the same face or in the same roadways, as before the outbreak of war. His conditions of work would almost certainly have deteriorated or, at best, remained static. He might have interpreted the introduction of Dual Control as constituting a step towards the future nationalisation of the industry but, for the moment, he would have been far more preoccupied with making sense of the many calls upon him to work harder - especially when those calls emerged, as increasingly they did, from the mouths of his own elected union officers.

Although there were regional variations within the coalfield, wartime labour relations did not improve to any great extent from the position preceding the war. The most amicable period was the twelve months or so which followed the Battle of Britain. Even the relatively large wage increases awarded the miners in 1942 (awarded mainly as an antidote to the drift of young men away from the mines to the better-paid ammunition factories) did little to improve the situation. Indeed, as Pollard has written, "In 1943-44, the bad industrial relations of the industry was the nearest approach to the rebellious spirit which was manifested in a wide range of industries in the later years of the 1914-18 war."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Sydney Pollard, The Development of the British Economy, 1914-1950, London 1962, p. 114.

Great stress was laid upon the importance of maintaining good industrial relations within the industry. Much publicity was given to the detrimental effects upon production of strikes and go-slows, and by 1945 the government, faced with the prospect of an acute coal shortage during the coming winter, searched for answers to this and other, more technical, problems.

It found its gaze being drawn towards a source of apparently boundless inspirational energy which emanated from the ranks of an organisation which only comparatively lately had come to be regarded as a dependable fount of appeals for increased productivity within the pits - namely, the miners' union. And there was no single source more energetic than that most notorious enemy of the "slave-driving" techniques of private enterprise, Arthur Horner.

Horner's track record in the Productivity Appeals Stakes had been second to none since the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. Despite early doubts as to his political pedigree, (doubts which later were to return with ~~him~~<sup>a</sup> vengeance) his immediate post-war form was impeccable and served only to illustrate his apparent intention to remain a loyal and active ally of the new Labour government. Indeed, even that champion of free enterprise, the "Colliery Guardian", was forced to admit in 1945 that it found his utterances "quite unexceptionable".<sup>11</sup>

On July 28th, 1945, for example, he told a delegate conference of the South Wales Area of the National Union of Mineworkers that, "With nationalisation of the mines no longer a long-distance prospect, a new obligation of self-discipline fell on the mines as a trade union". The biggest difficulty, he warned them, was to

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11 CollieryGuardian 3.8.45.

"overcome the idea that nationalisation meant everybody could do as he liked. The return of this Government meant not living in ease, but work organised fairly and scientifically."<sup>12</sup>

The conference accepted a resolution from the executive council calling on every member of the union to regard it as "a matter of working class honour to give complete support in word and deed to the new Government."<sup>13</sup>

One month later, Horner appealed to young Welsh miners to "become Stakhanovites", as "now that credits abroad had gone this country could only rehabilitate its economic life by hard work - if we didn't want to become a third-rate agricultural country." (presumably Horner's idea of hell)<sup>14</sup>

In September, 1945, he was appointed National Production Officer by the N.U.M. to lead an intensive propaganda campaign in every coalfield in an endeavour to create a "new atmosphere in the pit production committees and to secure the appointment of committees where they do not now exist."<sup>15</sup>

With the union leaders acting as disciples, preaching the gospel of increased productivity, and with the government depending ever-more upon the successful conversion of the mass of miners to the tenets of that gospel, the scene became set for the formal assumption of ownership of the industry by the National Coal Board on Vesting Day, January 1st, 1947. In the minds of the disciples was the vision of a powerful but eminently responsible

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12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

union - one which would be ready always to co-operate with the crusading Labour government in building a socialist Britain. There were almost irreconcilable differences amongst these disciples as to how, exactly, socialism in Britain might be achieved, and even as to what the term "socialism" actually meant. It was agreed, however, that nationalisation was a step in the right direction and that the slogan, "Make Nationalisation Work", was an admirable one in as much as it served to paper-over all but the most unconscious and deep-seated of the ideological divisions within the leadership of the N.U.M.

Indeed, from the summer of 1945 to the summer of 1947 the coalfields were pervaded by what might best be called a sense of euphoric anticipation. Miners and miners' leaders acted as if they were witnessing the onset of a socialist millenium which would consign to oblivion the evils of coalmining which they had suffered under private ownership.

The "euphoria", for what little it was worth in terms of increased productivity, was rudely pinched by the great and prolonged dispute at Grimethorpe colliery in Yorkshire. The very name, "Grimethorpe", evokes an image of dour reality. It even sounds abrasively industrial - the kind of word which, had it been uttered during the late summer of 1947, might have had the immediate effect of scraping away large fragments of the "goodwill", "mutual trust" and "new responsibilities" which had congealed and formed as a fresh skin on the public face of the coalmining industry since the election of the Labour government two years earlier.

Grimethorpe was the first mass-resighting of a creature which, apart from the odd, unavoidable movement, had lain slumbering in the deep as employers and union leaders had crossed, re-crossed and re-arranged the surface above it. Suddenly, the creature emerged, bellowing and angry, reminding all who weren't completely deaf that a pit was still a pit, nationalised or not.

The Grimethorpe strike was the most publicised of a rash of disputes which occurred, mainly in Yorkshire, Scotland and South Wales, during the middle months of 1947. The lodges involved in these incidents were attacked bitterly, both in the press and by the Labour Party and N.U.M. leaderships. The dilemma in which the lodge committees found themselves was an extremely complex one. The mining areas had voted solidly for the Labour Party in 1945 and the executive of the N.U.M. - including Communists like Horner - had pledged total co-operation with the new government; yet here were members of the N.U.M. who were striking, "staying-down" and "going-slow" as if nationalisation had never taken place.

These unofficial actions caused a kind of collective paranoia to sweep through large sections of the union's local and national leadership during 1947/48. Miners' presidents announced their anger and mystification when confronted with the spectacle afforded by pitmen who apparently were acting as rebelliously towards their new "socialist" masters as they had towards their former "private" ones. Furthermore, the "paranoia" affected even those sections of the workforce which had experienced the bitterest of the inter-war conflicts on the South Wales coalfield. The Parc and Dare lodge, in the Rhondda Valley, for example, exhibited a number of classic symptoms during a dispute at the pit in July, 1947.



The lodge, one of the largest on the coalfield, held a mass meeting during that month to discuss problems arising from some suggested changes in the price-list operating at the colliery. The result was a clear feeling that strike action would, under "normal" circumstances, be quite justified. A strike was not, however, called for. The Colliery Guardian reported that the:

"Parc and Dare miners, Treorchy, who gave such a lead to the nation on Sunday work during the fuel crisis and have figured in the news recently on account of their high production record, decided, during a mass meeting on July 20th, to 'continue at work and not play the game of the Tories who were inciting them to come out on strike and sabotage the nationalisation of the mines.'"<sup>16</sup>

When, eventually, a strike did take place during the following November, the 1,720 dayshift strikers worked an extra Saturday shift in order to make up for the loss of output resulting from the stoppage.<sup>17</sup>

The fact that a strike actually occurred in November when one had not taken place in July, however, is indicative of the way in which, even before the first year of public ownership had run its course, the golden promises of nationalisation were becoming tarnished with the shabby realities of mining in a crisis-ridden economy such as that which prevailed in Britain during the immediate post-war decade.

By 1952, very little of the gold remained visible. By that time, the Parc and Dare lodge was involved openly in the leadership of one of the revived, unofficial, combine committees and the route

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 7.47.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 11.47.

by which it arrived at this rebellious position was one followed, or at least skirted, by the lodges of many other pits. It wound its way through a series of running skirmishes - often of a bitter character - fought between, on the one hand, the leadership of the miners' union backed by a majority of lodge committees and, on the other, a large number of individual lodges acting alone or grouped together as unofficial "combines".

However, the problems which faced the leaders of the N.U.M. in the immediate post-war years were not confined to disciplining "renegade" lodges; neither were they limited to those which were consistent with the task of fulfilling a pledge of total co-operation with the Labour government and the National Coal Board. Big as these problems were, they were compounded further by the fact that the union leadership saw itself as forging an united organisation which would act as a weapon in the hands of the labour movement in the latter's efforts to replace the worst aspects of capitalism with socialist alternatives. Even the most hardened of the self-pronounced revolutionary socialists amongst the union's leaders made public this belief. Nationalisation had arrived and they were not about to allow a scattering of unofficial "sectionalists" to destroy it.

This is not to argue, however, that men of the calibre of Horner and Paynter were consciously "propping up the capitalist state" as some commentators on the far-Left would have us believe. Such an analysis depends for its validity upon a theory which presupposes that all strikes are good strikes - unless, that is, they happen to be overtly "reactionary" in their political or

social objectives, i.e., "reactionary" in the sense that they are opposed to the aims or sensibilities of the far-Left commentator. If Horner and Paynter appeared to have been fighting the dissident militants in their own union as energetically as they were opposing the worst aspects of Coal Board policy it was because they recognised certain limitations to their actual and potential powers as trade union leaders. Neither men (and it is important to remember that they represented two different generations of union leadership) regarded trade unions as revolutionary organisations. Both recognised that they were obliged to act within the confines of an accepted status-quo which defined clearly the relative positions of employer and trade unionist. Both recognised that, to run an effective trade union, certain criteria had to be fulfilled - the most important of which was the need to ensure a workable degree of unity amongst its members. Paynter, for example, saw the dissidents, even when they were his fellow members of the Communist Party, not as heroes of some guerrilla struggle against bureaucracy, (a bureaucracy of which he was, admittedly, a part) but as the unconscious perpetuators of the capitalist ethos of "individualism":

"It is not the effect that (sectionalist) strikes have upon production that worries me" he writes, "but the way in which they affect the social outlook of the people. Such strikes encourage the philosophy that individual and sectional interests transcend those of the mass; individualism and sectionalism are enhanced as a strategy, as a concept for social progress, and as the basis of a new philosophy in the trade union movement. I have spent a lifetime in the trade union movement as a revolutionary socialist, and this strategy and philosophy is opposed to everything that I was taught and to everything I believe as being necessary to the advance of socialism. If there is one lesson to be drawn from the history of the working class, ... it is that unity is paramount."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Paynter, op. cit. p. 157

Sectional strikes did not, and do not, occur, however, simply because a particular group of miners failed to relate their grievances to the over-all strategy of their elected leaders. Both Horner and Paynter may, at different times, have been dismayed and irritated by the continuance of unofficial action after the onset of nationalisation, but to the men involved in these actions the issues at stake could assume enormous importance. There was, for example, a feeling prevalent amongst certain sections of the workforce that the union's policy of co-operating fully with the Coal Board was leading to the enforced forfeiture of the workforce's hard-won and cherished "customs and practices" at individual pits and at groups of pits.

In February, 1948, for instance, fifteen Tareni colliery miners "stayed-down" for 90 hours (five of them stayed-down for 100 hours), demanding that the N.C.B. should not interfere with "custom and practice": "... particularly in relation to wages, nor interfere with managerial administration."<sup>19</sup> In retaliation, the Board accused the Tareni miners of being "wholly non-co-operative" over a long period, of being "ca'canny" and added that "in the light of the men's attitude there was no alternative but to close the colliery".<sup>20</sup>

The South Wales Area of the N.U.M. sent officials to Tareni and persuaded the stay-downers to surface on Thursday, February 19th. On the following Saturday a special coalfield conference was held in Cardiff of delegates representing more than 100,000 mineworkers. Before the conference was a resolution of the South Wales executive committee of the N.U.M. condemning the recent strikes, including that

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19 C.G. 13.2.48.

20 C.G. 20.2.48.

at Tareni. It called upon every miner to refuse to encourage the growth of a chaotic system of sectional strikes which threatened to drive the miners back to the "dark days of 50 years ago, when sectional difficulties allowed the coalowners to divide and conquer."<sup>21</sup>

It was carried by an overwhelming vote and a statement was issued on behalf of the delegates condemning the "disorderly situation" and announcing the conference's determination to "prevent the recurrence of the stoppages at a period when the country is passing through a serious crisis."<sup>22</sup> The vote was achieved, however, despite the fact that no fewer than seven anthracite collieries had struck work in support of the Tareni men earlier in the week,<sup>23</sup> and that there had been fourteen other major strikes, including four stay-downs, in the six weeks leading up to the conference. The following week brought with it three more "wildcat" strikes: at Maindy, Pantyffon and Varteg collieries. All three were strongly condemned by a second conference held in Cardiff on the following Saturday, when a decision was taken that miners who "stayed-down" would, in future, have no food sent down to them by their lodges.<sup>24</sup>

There was a great deal in this situation which smacked of confusion and even of intrigue. There appears to have been considerable numbers of lodge delegates who were prepared to vote in Cardiff denouncing unofficial action but who were also prepared, when they returned to their own pits, to participate in identical

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21 Board Minutes of Executive Council Meetings, Annual and Special Conferences; Coalfield Archive, Swansea.

22 C.G., 27.2.48.

23 Ibid.

actions to those which they had just condemned. It is not fanciful to suggest, as an explanation for this behaviour, that the delegates were subject to tensions and influences which resulted in such displays of inconsistency. There were undoubtedly a great many divisions existing within individual lodges. The most common line of fracture was that which ran between specific skills or work-areas. So-called "tit-for-tat" strikes were not uncommon within these pits - the most frequent culprits being face-workers and hauliers, both of whom were prone to strike work "in revenge" for an earlier stoppage by either one of them. For, if the hauliers stopped work or indulged in go-slow tactics, it invariably entailed loss of earnings by the men at the coal face since little or no coal was allowed to be transported to the surface. Similarly, if the face workers ceased production then the hauliers were likely to be laid off on account of the fact that there was no coal for them to haul.

To further complicate matters, face-teams, or teams of hauliers, could themselves be divided into two broad sub-groups: on the one hand there would be those who attempted to implement union policy by following agreed negotiatory procedures with regard to outstanding disputes and, on the other, those who favoured the use of direct and immediate action in attempts to short-circuit lengthy negotiatory procedures. Within pits which included such teams, the lodge committees invariably reflected the divisions and the confusion. Internal discipline was often insufficient to bring to heel the individual strikers and the committees frequently were forced to request assistance from the Area N.U.M. headquarters at Cardiff.

This resulted in a further polarisation of the two tendencies - a polarisation which manifested itself on a wider scale, in as much as there appeared, by 1949, to be two distinct and often opposing sides operating within the Area union. The first of these was epitomized by the more "organised" amongst the strikers - those who were sometimes capable of paralysing large sections of the coalfield by exercising considerable powers as "alternative" leaders and by creating what amounted to an unofficial executive which brought together and sometimes directed, sympathetic minds from pits right across the coalfield.

This "executive" met, during its more cohesive phases, at the Shakespeare Hotel in Neath. To an outsider, its general line would have appeared confusing. The Shakespeare Hotel movement was never opposed, for example, to the declared intention of the South Wales N.U.M. to create a powerful and centralised union which would bargain on a coalfield-wide basis in conjunction with a similarly structured national union. There was, however, a definite and apparently contradictory insistence upon the right of an individual lodge committee to retain the power to take unofficial action if they felt that the situation at their pits demanded it.

Ignoring, for the moment, the possibility that the unofficial leaders were implicitly advocating an extension of industrial and union democracy - a supposition difficult to quantify in this case due to the ad-hoc nature of the Shakespeare Hotel movement - it is possible to diagnose the most important of the causes of industrial indiscipline and frustration amongst the union's membership. The strike demands of the Tareni stay-downers (see above), for example, provide an excellent catalogue of the

most serious of the common grievances.

The demand that the N.C.B. should not interfere with "custom and practice" had been a common demand from lodges after nationalisation and one which had been far from rare during the pre-nationalisation attempts by certain of the big coal-companies to standardise and rationalise production methods in the pits which they acquired as they expanded.

The Coal Board's plans for speed-up and mechanisation depended for success upon it being able to persuade or coerce the workforce into accepting new methods of working. To do so, it would have to succeed where the private companies had often failed or achieved success only after sometimes prolonged and bitter wrangles with the miners' union. Defences of "custom and practice" had been anathema to the controllers of firms like Powell Duffryn and Amalgamated Anthracite. Their attempts to standardise and rationalise coal production led to a great many clashes of varying intensity and size - from the huge Anthracite Strike of 1926, to the prolonged and bitter argument within the Powell Duffryn pits over techniques for measuring work and payment in the late 1930s. After the second World War, the union found itself in as many difficulties as did the N.C.B. as a result of problems posed by the continuance of "custom and practice". Pledged to co-operate in pushing up production, the N.U.M. found itself having to persuade its members, by various means, to accept measures designed and proposed by the N.C.B. to eradicate restrictive practices and thereby to contribute to a general boosting of output. To some union members, this sounded like a request by their own union leaders to sacrifice pit "rights" which had been won only after years of conflict and hard-bargaining with



the former private owners. For men to relinquish, without protest, effective and trusted defences such as that offered, for example, by the "seniority rule"\* was a very great deal for any union, management or government to expect - no matter what its shade of politics.

Though most lodges reacted positively to the N.U.M.'s pleas for co-operation and "sacrifice", the response was far from even. It is not easy to explain why this was so. To investigate the reasons why one particular lodge should be ready to sacrifice many of its pit "rights" whilst a neighbouring lodge steadfastly refused to move an inch in that direction, it is necessary to confront the images and myths which have been spun by novelists, journalists, film-makers and historians regarding the "uniformity", "homogeneity" and working-class "solidarity" which they allege to be characteristic of the communities of the South Wales coalfield.

The most powerful of these are the ones which filtered through from the inter-war depression. They tell of common suffering, of solidarity in the face of widespread social deprivation and of a shared sense of political and trade union

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\* The so-called "seniority rule" is, in effect, a blanket term covering a large number of practices by which mineworkers attempted to control who did what job. At its simplest, it entailed the application of the principle of "first man in, last man out". This was applied also to the waiting list for good places at the coal face or to the choicier of the haulage jobs. Thus, a manager seeking to "rationalise" production at a coal face would first have to overcome the obstacle of removing (if he so desired) the most senior (in terms of time spent working at the pit) of the face workers before he was able to replace them with younger, stronger and, perhaps, more adaptable colliers.

defiance when confronted with governmental repression and T.U.C. inertia. Taken together, they create an image of a workforce united against the major forces of exploitation. This image contains elements of truth but it is far from being a faithful one for there were periods during the inter-war years when internecine struggles within the ranks of the South Wales miners threatened to destroy whatever strength through unity they possessed. There grew up, for example, in the aftermath of the 1926 Lockout, a rival trade union\* which was defeated only after great expenditure of time and money by the South Wales Miners' Federation. The membership of this union was not imported from across the Severn or brought in from the Welsh countryside; it came from the towns and villages of the coalfield itself.

To understand why such divisions occurred in the 1920s and '30s and why other divisions replaced them in the '40s and '50s, it is necessary to understand the nature of the relationships which existed between, on the one hand, the external social and economic factors at work upon the coalfield and, on the other hand, colliery business and union politics, for all three informed the nature of the workforce's political consciousness throughout this period. Given that this consciousness was far from being homogenous, it is essential to discern the different levels and gradations within it, for they exercised an enormous influence on the forms of the organisations which emerged amongst the South Wales miners and on the directions which these organisations took.

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\* i.e., the South Wales Miners' Industrial Union; known variously as the "Non-Pol's union", the "White Guard" or, more simply, the "Scab union".

## Chapter Two

### Visions of Slavery

Coal mining was by far the most important industry in South Wales during the 1930s. It accounted for 37.1 per cent. of insured workers in 1935 - and even this represented a considerable reduction in its relative importance, for in 1923 it had accounted for 51.8 per cent.<sup>1</sup> In 1923, the pits of South Wales employed 252,909 men. By 1937, they employed just 136,088.<sup>2</sup>

Output fell. In 1923, the coalfield produced 54,251,587 tons of saleable coal. By 1937, production had fallen to 37,773,013 tons. As a percentage of the total output of Great Britain, South Wales production constituted just under 20 per cent. in 1923 and considerably less than 16 per cent. in 1937.<sup>3</sup> Output of coal per person per annum in South Wales did not, however, share the same decline. It stood at 214.51 tons in 1923 and 277.56 tons in 1937.<sup>4</sup>

Exports dropped every year after 1929 - from 29.9 million tons to 19.1 in 1935, and the position worsened not only absolutely but relatively to the rest of the country. The percentage of South Wales exports to United Kingdom exports fell from 37 per cent. in 1929, to 35 per cent. in 1935.<sup>5</sup> The decline was not experienced by all Welsh coals however. Production in the anthracite sector of the field was greater in 1934 than at any time previously and exports during that year were only slightly below the figure

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1 "The Second Industrial Survey of South Wales", Cardiff, 1937, p.37.

2 "Regional Survey Report, 1946", Ministry of Fuel & Power, HMSO, 1946.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 The Second Industrial Survey op.cit., pp. 37-38.

attained in 1929. The sector produced 86.4 per cent. of the country's total anthracite production in 1935.<sup>6</sup> Its buoyancy contrasted sharply with the depressed conditions prevalent in the steam-coal producing valleys to the east where the most buoyant statistics were those which recorded the inflated numbers of unemployed miners.

### Unemployment

The great decline in employment from 1920 onwards and the general uncertainty of trade conditions in the industry resulted in a vast migration of labour from coal mining in South Wales to other industries and to other areas. Not only did large numbers of experienced men, unable to find employment in the mines, seek employment elsewhere, but a great proportion of youth reared in the mining communities, unable to find employment in the local pits, or reluctant to enter an industry which could not give security of employment, sought work in other industries locally or in other parts of the country. Between 1921 and 1935, close on 315,000 people moved away from the South Wales industrial area.<sup>7</sup> It was the mining districts of Glamorgan and Monmouthshire which, of course, suffered the heaviest proportional losses, for it was they which contained the densest centres of unemployed, or "temporarily stopped" within the Industrial Region.<sup>8</sup> This number increased to 192,310 by December, 1932, before gradually diminishing until in June, 1936, it stood at 161,831. For some of the coalmining

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 39

<sup>7</sup> i.e. the area upon which was based the Second Industrial Survey - the area contained within the boundaries of the coalfield with the addition of the coastal towns and ports.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.30

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 71

towns, however, this easing of unemployment totals took a good deal longer. In 1932, the number of coalminers unemployed in South Wales stood at 81,507, or almost 43 per cent. of the total labour force.<sup>9</sup> By September, 1935, that figure had dropped to 62,155, but just over half of the remaining total was concentrated in an area comprising ~~of just~~ three valley complexes: Merthyr, the Rhondda, and Aberdare.

In 1935, the percentage of miners unemployed in the Merthyr Valley stood at 51.5 per cent, or 7 per cent fewer than September, 1934. In the Rhondda, the 1935 figure was 45.9 per cent, 2.8 per cent worse than 1934, but somewhat better than the 1932 figure of 52.9 per cent unemployed.

For the Aberdare valley, however, 1935 brought with it the highest percentage of unemployment it had yet experienced. 7,682 men were without work - 44.6 per cent of the labour force. For this valley at least, the unemployed total had continued to climb from 1929 onwards with little sign of falling back.

Alternative employment was virtually non-existent. Coal production had dominated Aberdare to the exclusion of almost all other industry. The manufacture of iron had ceased in the valley, and in neighbouring Merthyr Tydfil the great Dowlais iron works ~~was~~ <sup>was</sup> idle. Merthyr had its own problems, with just over half of its mining labour force out of work. To the south-west, the Rhondda presented an equally grey, desperate face, with just under half her miners unemployed.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 71

Aberdare's one-industry identity did not change even when the sluggish wave of "Public Works Contracting" rippled across the coalfield (as part of the Government's attempts to alleviate unemployment). Aberdare was left high and dry on her ever-growing mountain of unemployment. Whereas in the Merthyr Valley, for instance, the number of men employed in Public Works contracting rose from 441 in 1931, to 2,037 in 1934, in Aberdare the corresponding figures were 209 in 1931, rising to 618 in 1934.<sup>10</sup>

In 1935, approximately 40 per cent of Merthyr's unemployed miners were involved in Public Works contracting; in other valleys the figures were even higher, reaching almost 60 per cent in Western Monmouth, and 68 per cent in the Vale of Neath. The Aberdare figure stood at approximately 8 per cent. Compared to the increase in miners unemployed in the vicinity of the town, the additional Public Works employment was almost negligible.<sup>11</sup>

The Aberdare and Rhondda valleys contained one of the highest ratio of coal-miners to all-workers of any of the South Wales coal-producing districts. Whereas the ratio of miners to other occupations in Merthyr Vale stood at 52.6 per cent in 1935, and 44.3 per cent in the Port Talbot, Neath, Amman and Swansea districts, it stood at 73.2 per cent in Aberdare and Rhondda.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., Chapter 2, Section 1.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

### The Mines

It was in the valleys of Aberdare, Rhondda, Merthyr and Rhymney that most collieries were abandoned or suffered the most dramatic reduction in size. Table One illustrates the extent to which the overall decline in output and employment was related to the number and size of collieries in production. It lists the size distribution of coal mines according to employment in the years 1920, 1930 and 1938. The number of wage-earners employed and the output of saleable coal are given for each size-group of mines and the relative importance of each size-group of mines and the relative importance of each size-group with regard to employment is indicated by percentages.

Between 1920 and 1938, when output and employment more or less reflected the demand for coal, there was an appreciable reduction in the number of mines in each size-group with the exception of the very small ones employing less than twenty wage-earners, those employing 500 to 749 wage-earners and those employing 1,000 to 1,499 wage-earners. There was a trend towards medium sized units, as indicated by the diminishing contribution to the total output of mines employing less than 250 wage-earners. This resulted partly from the closure of mines but was in some measure due to a contraction in the scale of operations at a number of large collieries which were re-organised to operate economically on reduced outputs. Similar contraction took place at a number of medium sized collieries and the net result was the maintenance of an output capacity considerably in excess of the output actually obtained on the coalfield.

# SIZE DISTRIBUTION OF COAL MINES ACCORDING TO EMPLOYMENT

* In addition	48 mines employing	380 persons not producing coal	+	In addition	54 mines employing	407 persons not producing coal
+	" "	37	" "	" "	" "	" "
+	" "	327	" "	" "	" "	" "



In general, excessive output capacity can only be maintained at some sacrifice of efficiency and usually results in a lowering of output per manshift worked overall.<sup>14</sup> Over the period 1920 to 1938 this tendency was largely counteracted by the fact that the least productive mines were closed and the contraction in the scale of operations at mines continuing in production was largely affected by concentration upon the most productive seams and districts.<sup>15</sup> In this way the maintenance of excessive output capacity was achieved with the least possible detriment to production efficiency. The position thus created was, however, temporary in character and could not be maintained indefinitely without some adverse effect upon efficiency.

The period was one of a complex series of absorptions, amalgamations and concentrations generally.<sup>16</sup> Only in a relatively few cases were the areas worked by those mines which closed down finally abandoned. In the majority of cases the areas formerly worked by, and the residual coal reserves of, the closed mines were attached to those collieries remaining in production. Those mines finally abandoned were situated mainly around the edges of the coalfield. Within the main body of the field very few areas were abandoned or allowed to become derelict and waterlogged, and a feature of the concentration achieved was that practically the whole area continued to be actively mined from considerably fewer collieries.

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14 Report of the Coalmines Reorganisation Commission, December, 1933.

15 N.K. Buxton, "Entrepreneurial Efficiency in the British Coal Industry between the Wars" E.H.R., XXIII, 1970.

16 See Coalmines Reorganisation Commission, 1933. Also, The Second Industrial Survey of South Wales, Vol. 1, Chapter 2: W.J. Anthony-Jones, "Labour Relations in the South Wales Coalmining Industry, 1926-39", Aberystwyth 1959; Buxton op.cit.; A.M. Newman, "Economic Organization of the Bristol Coal Industry", London, 1934. See, also, Appendix 2 below.

### The Owners

In 1927 the seven largest mining companies in South Wales produced 16.7 million tons of coal out of a total coalfield tonnage of just over 46.25 million. This represented 36.1 per cent. of South Wales production.<sup>17</sup>

In 1936 the seven largest mining companies on the coalfield produced 32.5 million tons out of a total tonnage of 33.9 million tons. This represented almost 96 per cent. of South Wales production.<sup>18</sup>

By 1946, the coalfield was dominated by four major companies: Partridge Jones and John Paton in the eastern part of the field; Powell Duffryn and Ocean in the centre and Amalgamated Anthracite in the west. Of these, Powell Duffryn was by far the largest. It controlled 45 of the 73 working collieries within its main area of influence and employed a massive workforce which numbered more than 40,000 as early as 1937. (In which year the total number of miners employed on the field was just over 136,000.)

The highly monopolistic character of the South Wales coal industry<sup>19</sup> was lamented in dramatic terms, in 1945, by that fallen angel of the Valleys, Frank Hodges. He blamed the decline of the Welsh coal trade on the "ever-expanding combine octopus" with its "crushing effect on individual initiative and enterprise." He prophesied that the days of individualism would never return: "We are entering a slave state, and slavery and happiness do not

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17 See Appendix 2, p.

18 Ibid., p. 17

19 Appendix 2 for a justification of this statement.

go hand in hand." He argued that it was "no use thinking that nationalisation (was) the antidote to monopolies or combines", an upturn in South Wales trade could come about only by a drive for "improved efficiency" on the part of technical management and workmen in the industry.<sup>20</sup>

Hodges was not alone in equating the growth of the combine companies with a general tendency towards industrial "slavery". The term still used, as late as 1975, by ex-Powell Duffryn miners to describe the wages they received during the bleakest of the inter-war years is "rice money" and this image of the owners as Railroad Barons employing indentured Chinese coolies was only one of the analogies used by the miners during the 1930s and '40s to identify and illustrate the nature of the exploitation to which they believed themselves subject. Another was that drawn between the plight of the "combine" employees and the plight of those workers in Europe who were subject to fascist or nazi rule - an analogy much favoured by the spokesmen of the Communist Party in Wales during this period. Two months before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, for instance, Arthur Horner emphasised the need for strong union organisation to meet the threat of company unionism in the pits of South Wales: "The fight against fascism is the fight for trade unionism .. one hundred per cent. conscious militant trade unionism is the most important safeguard against fascism .. Scab unionism is fascism in embryo."<sup>21</sup>

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20 C.G., 19.1.45.

21 D. Worker, 25.5.36; cited in H. Francis "Welsh Miners and the Spanish Civil War", Journal of Contemporary History, 1970, p.177.

In his work on the involvement of the Welsh miners in the Spanish Civil War, Hywel Francis argues that the miners from South Wales who volunteered to fight with the International Brigades saw the war as an extension of their own "defensive" activity on the coalfield in the 1930s, "against encroachment on living standards and trade union rights."<sup>22</sup>

The bitter struggle between the South Wales Miners' Federation and the company unionists at Bedwas colliery in the mid 1930s provoked the publication by the Federation of an extensive comparison of the positions of miners in South Wales and of their working comrades in Germany:

**South Wales Miners' Federation.**

**TO THE BEDWAS COLLIERY WORKMEN.**

**Look at this**

**- - and this.**

**In Germany Now.**  
NO FREE TRADE UNION.  
NO FREE SPEECH.  
NO SECURITY OF EMPLOYMENT.  
NO TRADE UNION BALANCE SHEET.  
STATE APPOINTMENT OF WORKMEN'S REPRESENTATIVES.  
INTIMIDATION.  
VICTIMISATION.  
PERSECUTION OF JEWS.  
NO FREE WORKMEN'S INSTITUTE.  
NO WELFARE ORGANISATION.  
COMPULSORY DEDUCTIONS OF STATE UNION CONTRIBUTIONS FROM WAGES.  
CONCENTRATION CAMPS.  
A SPY IN EVERY STREET.

**In Bedwas Now.**  
NO FREE TRADE UNION.  
NO FREE SPEECH.  
24 HOURS NOTICE.  
NO TRADE UNION BALANCE SHEET.  
COMPANY APPOINTMENT OF WORKMEN'S REPRESENTATIVES.  
INTIMIDATION.  
VICTIMISATION.  
PERSECUTION OF WELSHMEN.  
NO FREE WORKMEN'S INSTITUTE.  
NO DEDUCTIONS FOR WELFARE.  
COMPULSORY DEDUCTIONS OF COMPANY UNION CONTRIBUTIONS.  
BLACKLEG BARRACKS.  
A SPY ON EVERY CONVEYOR.

"The Patriot," the political organ of a Dr-Hard group of Tories, regards both "Fascism" and the "Non-Pols." with equal favour. It regards "World Jewry" and the Miners' Federation with equal hatred.

Do the Owners of the Bedwas Colliery realise that they are nourishing a viper that will bite the hand that feeds it?

Do you workmen of Bedwas realise that you are being compelled to support the industrial counterpart of Hitler and Mussolini?

**BE READY FOR THE CALL TO FREEDOM.**

For the South Wales Miners' Federation,

**THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL.**

Cymdeithedd Ffrees Press, Next to Street, Cardiff.

Francis quotes an International Brigader as defining his employer in the following way: "The Powell Duffryn Coal Company is fascism".<sup>24</sup> To understand why such an apparently outrageous assertion made sense to a large number of employees in the 1930s, it is necessary to examine the images which the labour force as a whole (and the Communists amongst them in particular) held of the relationships which existed between themselves and the coalowners on the one hand, and between the coalowners and the government on the other.

#### Images of Conspiracy

There has never been a period during the relatively short history of the coalfield's workforce when the majority of miners and their families have acquired and expressed what most orthodox marxists would define as constituting a "correct" understanding of their class situation. This is not to argue that the South Wales workforce has been characterised by backward or reactionary political tendencies. On the contrary, there has existed for the better part of this century in South Wales a relatively large and powerful minority of working class socialists whose members have never been far from the vanguard of west European industrial militancy and who have occupied leading positions in the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary life of the British Left.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.83.

But, as a product of capitalism, the workers of South Wales have been, as Lukacs puts it, "subject to the modes of existence" of their employers. They have found their economic exploitation "easier to understand than the political, and the political easier than the cultural."<sup>25</sup>

These "deficiencies" of class analysis are not to be explained simply by cataloguing the range of industrial grievances experienced in South Wales during the 1930s. It was not the lack of a sufficient variety of exploitations that prevented the Valleys' communities abandoning the colours of the Labour Party in favour of more scarlet varieties. The possible reasons for the analytical "deficiencies" of the South Wales workforce are as uncertain and debatable as they are whenever attempts are made to explain similar deficiencies in other industrial communities. They concern problems of political perception, education and leadership which lie beyond the scope of this study.

A catalogue of industrial grievances can help explain the troubleprone industrial relationships and political radicalism associated with this coalfield. It is useful, for example, to record the ways in which the more important of these grievances overlapped one with another and became interwoven in the minds of the miners and their families. For it was this overlapping of certain industrial and political issues which made possible the maintenance of persistent large-scale social and industrial demonstrations of dissatisfaction and unrest throughout the

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25 George Lukacs, "History and Class Consciousness", London 1971, pp. 76-77.

1930s and which ensured a heightening and a continuance of the kinds of tension which had existed since 1910 between certain sections of the mining workforce on the one hand, and the traditional political and industrial leadership on the other.

The most influential of these amalgamated grievances was the link which the mining population perceived between the mine-owners and central government.

There appears to have existed little doubt, in the minds of most South Wales miners and their families, that the majority of inter-war governments were anything other than natural allies of the mine-owners. Everything seemed to point in that direction. There were the obvious, personal links between owners and government: most adult Welsh miners in the 1920s and 1930s would have remembered that D.A. Thomas - later Lord Rhondda, the first great Welsh coal "combine" owner - and Alfred Mond (later Lord Melchett, Chairman of Amalgamated Anthracite) had been invited in 1916 to join Lloyd George's "clutch of tycoons" in his War Cabinet. The owners were known to be represented in the House of Commons by a substantial number of M.P.s who, between them, held considerable financial interests in the coal industry. In 1938, for instance, it was calculated that 24 M.P.s were directly linked with numerous important coal companies, including Powell Duffryn and Amalgamated Anthracite.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the coal-owners were in an almost unique position of indirect political influence in as much as it was they who controlled British industry's major source of power.

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26 Margot Heinemann, "Britain's Coal", London, 1944, p. 134.

Their influence regarding the policies adopted by some of their major customers (iron, steel and engineering firms) towards state "interference" in coal affairs was known to be great, for these firms included on their boards of directors numerous M.P.s:

"A detailed study of the directorships held by Members of Parliament showed that in 1938 fifty-one M.P.s held 109 directorships of iron, steel, coal and engineering companies ... two Conservative Prime Ministers ... came from families with long associations in heavy industry - Mr. Baldwin's with Baldwins Limited, South Wales coal and steel combine; Mr. Chamberlain's with Guest Keen and Nettlefolds, coal, steel and engineering combine." 27

The understanding which some sections of the mining workforce had of the directorial links between M.P.s and coal companies<sup>28</sup> served to supplement the more nebulous, but far more important, impressions held by much larger sections of the workforce regarding the role played by successive governments in the traumatic strikes, lockouts and disturbances of 1910-11, 1921, 1925 and 1926.

There prevailed amongst these sections an overwhelming sense of having repeatedly been subdued or defeated either by government trickery or as a result of their own elected leaders having been "corrupted" into betrayal by governments which sided inevitably with the owners and which were as liable to use brute force to win the day (Tonypandy, 1910-11) as they were to use deprivation and starvation (the Lockouts of 1921 and 1926) and corruption (Black Friday, 1921; the collapse of the General Strike, 1926). There

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27 Ibid., p. 133.

28 The links were first pointed out to me by Mr. Glyn Williams, ex-anthracite and steam coal miner. Recorded Trecynon, October, 1973.



were, in addition, a series of experiences which the coalfield underwent during the inter-war years which were to have an even more fundamental influence upon the attitude of the workforce towards the allegedly conspiratorial alliance of government and coal-owners. These experiences centred around the problems posed to the workforce and the Miners' Federation by long-term mass unemployment and by the coal-owner's attempts to centralise and rationalise coal production.

A miner made redundant by a pit closure carried out in the name of rationalisation was forced to join the ranks of the unemployed or else to migrate in search of work. He became, automatically, part of a reserve army of labour which, in the eyes of Federation officials and militants, posed a constant threat to any union member who "stuck up for his rights" at his place of work. The owners were alleged by the workforce to have openly manipulated this situation to their best advantage - with the blessing of local and national administrations. The problems constantly overlapped. The evils of unemployment were blamed frequently upon the spread of "rationalising" monopolistic coal combines which the government encouraged; whilst the ability of certain combine managements to trample over their employees during local disputes was attributed to the debilitating effects wrought upon the Miners' Federation by that same unemployment - the seriousness of which the government appeared largely to ignore.

By 1931, the fact that the Welsh coal industry was controlled by a small number of great companies whose financial backers and directors included representatives of City banks and investment corporations - most of whom had their headquarters situated in areas remote from

the point of production tended to reinforce certain of the workforce's suppositions.

Quite logically, it assumed that City bankers were not investing in the coal industry purely as a gesture of their affection for coal mining. Their object, the workforce assumed, was to make as great a profit as was possible. The question was asked, "Where is this profit to come from?". The answer was obvious. Since the post-war decline in the export market, it could come only from an increase in coal prices in the home market, or, as was more probable, from management's efforts to increase work-rates and productivity and from a screwing-down of the wages bill.

These were precisely the measures which the coal-owners adopted. Their policy of wages retrenchment was paralleled by the attempts of the National Government to follow the suggestions forwarded by the May Committee which had recommended large cut-backs in governmental social spending and particularly in the payment of unemployment allowance benefit. The unemployed were, after all, an excellent target in this respect; they were without any real industrial bargaining power and, for the most part, they were concentrated in areas which were remote from Westminster.

Faced with the impending prospect of witnessing a further decline in the already deplorable living standards of thousands of its unemployed members, the coalfield's workforce fought back. It concentrated its efforts upon attacking that most loathed of local government practices, the Means Test.

### The Means Test

The Means Test has remained the frontispiece of the South Wales Book of Demonology ever since the mid-1930s. It became a symbol of the prevailing wretchedness and economic desperation as well as providing the coalfield's population with its most damning evidence that the government was prepared to subject working people to penury at the same time as it encouraged the rich (the controllers of the coal companies) to seek more efficient ways of growing richer.

The animosity directed towards the Means Test tended to focus itself on those whose task it was to apply it. The functions of the Courts of Referees (which judged the amounts of benefit to be paid) came to be regarded by large numbers of miners as being complementary to the efforts of those coal-owners who were intent upon destroying the organised job-defences of the miners by any means possible. Each niggling dispute at the pit-head seemed to have its counterpart at the dole office.<sup>29</sup> The owners and the government were perceived to be sharing a common purpose: namely, to cut back on wages. And at no time did this appear more obvious than it did during the winter of 1934/35.

On November 17th, 1934, Sir Henry Betterton, the Minister of Labour, proudly announced that in the two years from October 1st, 1931, to October 1st, 1933, the Government had saved £26,750,000 through cuts in the unemployment benefit and a further £27,750,000

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29 See Allen Hutt, "The Condition of the Working Class in Britain", London, 1933, p.6.

by the operation of the Family Means Test.<sup>30</sup> Just over two months later, one of the coal-owners' numerous mouth pieces, the Colliery Guardian, shouted approval for the government's savings:

"The most hopeful feature ... is that it may help to destroy the pernicious fallacy that has been built up in the years of industrial stress, that the resources of the state may be usefully employed in keeping workmen off the labour market and in maintaining the purchasing power of the community. It is impossible for any state to pursue such a course interminably. If we are to judge from an investigation carried out for the I.L.O., unemployment insurance has had very little effect in strengthening the workers' resistance against wage reductions. What is far more important is that the system, once it emerged from the contributory basis, has seriously weakened the moral fibre of the industrial population, even if it has staved off starvation and preserved some measure of physical well-being. All over the world - in Italy, in Germany, and now in the USA - it is being recognised that the 'doles' are inimical to the health of communities that have to fight for their existence. The new regulations (which were announced with the savings) we believe, are founded upon a similar conviction much more than upon a realization that the cost of social services has risen from £3,000,000 in 1900 to £590,000,000 in 1933." 31

The interpretation placed upon such statements varied. In some quarters, they were interpreted by mineworkers - employed and unemployed alike - as being part of a concerted attempt by the coal-owners and their government allies to reduce the miners and their families to a state of complete submission. The message seemed clear enough: the more men out of work, the easier to peg wages; the tighter the restrictions on unemployment benefit, the less the workers' resistance against wage reductions.

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30 W. Hannington, "Ten Lean Years", London 1940, p. 109.

31 C.G., 11.1.35.

Of those ex-mineworkers and their families whom I questioned on the topic, it was the more politically aware amongst them who claimed to have adopted such an interpretation. There appears, however, to have been a more general acceptance of a view which declared that, once more, the government were being callously "unfair" to mining families.

This concept of "fair play" - of the importance of being "morally correct", or of sticking "fairly" to agreed principles - was of equal importance in the critical vocabulary of the majority of the South Wales workforce to any political consideration which it might have made when confronted with such "problems" as those posed by the Means Test and Mass Unemployment.

Public expression of social indignation proliferated in South Wales during the 'Thirties, and many of them took the form of calls for "social justice", or for a "square deal" for the unemployed miner and his family - rather than emphasising a need for revolutionary change of a political nature. Sometimes, however, these expressions bridged the gap between the "political" critic of the kind who saw a government-coal-owner conspiracy, and the "moral" critic. In the following short article, for example, written for the "Aberdare Leader" by the Rev. Colin M. Gibb, M.A. - in the section of the paper known as "Minister's Corner" - the author paints a picture of social misery in a fashion befitting an outraged humanitarian reformer, but ends his article with words which clearly imply that "reformism" has failed and that perhaps the only answer is revolutionary action:

"While the country's trade and commerce generally have shared in a pronounced recovery, economic distress is still acute in large areas. None of these is hit so badly as South Wales. In Aberdare District the percentage of unemployed remains near 50 per cent. In the Midlands it ranges under 10 and reaches 5. While even in London the percentage of malnutrition among school children is only 4.6 per cent., in our valley nearly half the children are underfed. Of those examined in different areas of South Wales, the percentages of malnutrition reach from 21 to 59.6 per cent., and this has been going on for some years.

In South Wales there are thousands living in poverty, with the family income not exceeding thirty shillings for four persons. In many a home, after paying rent and food, there is hardly a penny left for clothing and other necessities for minimum comfort. There are houses in which blankets are almost unknown, and bed coverings have to be made up of old garments patched and sewn together. Even old newspapers and brown paper are pressed into service. These areas are full of thin and hungry people.

One woman citizen of Merthyr wrote recently - "We have travelled through winters of disappointment, of disillusionment, of despair. Perhaps this winter will prove to be the winter of disintegration. All the old pieties and sanctions are disappearing, the old loyalties are being abandoned, and the very fabric of society is crumbling to the dust. Men feel that society has discarded them."

The average diet of the poor is deficient in every constituent. They have to go without sufficient proportions of eggs, milk and fruit. It is the declared judgement of the Mountain Ash Medical Officer of Health that - "The question of diet is entirely an economic one. This area is slowly but sidiously deteriorating owing to the lack of nourishment."

#### Public Ignorance of the Facts

It may appear that in a Christian country, where many people share a feeling of sympathy, and desire to help, that such poverty could not be allowed to prevail. But the British public as a whole does not yet realise the facts. They are not allowed to know ...

...They hear of large transfers of families to the more prosperous areas, where they readily find employment and establish themselves in new homes. But they are not aware that this manoeuvre not only leaves the problem of the depressed areas unsolved, but renders it more difficult. Business dwindles, shopkeepers see their weekly turnover reduced, rateable value decreases, and rates mount up annually.

Under such distressing difficulties, the further infliction of the Means Test falls with such devastating effect that the entire community view the issue with alarm and dismay. Orderly mass meetings have registered their protests, copies of resolutions have been duly forwarded to the Premier and the Members of Parliament; Marchers to London have been unwillingly heard by Ministers. No Use! All constitutional means have been well-nigh exhausted. Tension is at breaking point. Things may happen." 32

In some places on the coalfield, the tension had already broken. As Hywel Francis points out, the mid-1930s saw unemployed mining communities displaying "an increasing readiness to participate in social disturbances." He argues that because the communities had, through pit closures, lost their bargaining power in an economic sense, they reverted to "seemingly pre-industrial tactics of 'collective bargaining by riot'." He lists the causes of the various disturbances as proof that the communities were not merely reacting in a blind, automatic fashion to the harsh social and economic environment which they inhabited:

"There were disturbances at Mardy (1932) against a 'rates eviction'; at Bedwas (1933) and Bedlinog (1935) - against company unionism; at Merthyr (1934), Abertillery, Nantyglo, and Blaina (1935) against the Means Test; at Ammanford (1935) during a transport dispute; and at Tonypandy (1936) against fascism." 33

The reasons behind this apparent readiness of some communities to resort to "direct action" can be attributed, in a great part, to the sense of sheer frustration and political impotence felt by large sections of the Valleys' population in the face of the unwillingness, or inability, of the National

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32 Aberdare Leader, 16.1.37.

33 H. Francis, op.cit., p. 178.

Government to come to terms with the problems posed by mass unemployment. Some measure of this frustration can be gained from the following account of a trial which occurred in Aberdare in 1938:

"U.A.B. Office Damaged - Hirwaun Man Smashes Windows as Protest against Means Test."

"64 year-old Leonard Crouch, Tramway, Hirwaun ... was charged at Aberdare Police Court on Wednesday with causing damage to the extent of £2.5s. at the U.A.B. office ... asked why he smashed the windows Crouch replied, "As a protest against the treatment we have received as a family under the Means Test. I am prepared to suffer any penalty for what I have done."

Sargeant Waygood (the arresting officer) added that the defendant told him that he had brought the stones down from Hirwaun specially for the purpose of smashing the windows in the U.A.B. building.

Stipendiary (addressing Crouch): "What have you got to say for such extraordinary behaviour on your part?"

Crouch: "I did it as a protest against the cuts made in our Means Test allowance as a family.

He was 64 years of age and had never been in trouble before, he added.

Stipendiary Bown Davies, in fining Crouch £5 said, "This kind of conduct can't be tolerated for a moment, no matter what insane delusion you might have had at the time.

If you had been a younger man you would have been sent to prison for some months.

Your age and responsibility have saved you from that. You should be ashamed of yourself in behaving this way.

There is enough ruffianism going on in this district without you exaggerating the situation.

Defendant was ordered to pay costs also ..."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Aberdare Leader, 2.4.38.



Leonard Crouch's action was an individual expression of the same sense of frustration and anger which had manifested itself in the anti-eviction disturbances in Maerdy in 1932, and in the violence at the U.A.B. offices in Ammanford in 1935.

The "individual" nature of Crouch's act, however, reflects a different facet of the consciousness and morale of the industrial population of the Valleys during the 1930s than that associated with most public demonstrations.

The examples of collective action cited by Hywel Francis were far from being untypical of the way in which large sections of the population expressed their dissatisfaction and indignation. But for many thousands of families, the experience of long-term unemployment and physical deprivation engendered feelings of hopelessness and personalised depression, rather than "positive", determined solidarity.

It produced a depression which, although it may well have been experienced, and to some degree, even collectively "shared", by whole communities, tended nevertheless to erode the individual's sense of communal identity. It was the kind of depression which produced its own, sadder, examples of "direct action" - ranging from the mass exodus of young men and women to the car factories of the Midlands and the servants' quarters of Southern England's wealthier houses, to small, tragic gestures such as that which occurred near Aberdare in the Summer of 1938. The report in the local newspaper ran as follows:

'Tragic Discovery at Cwmdare

Cwmdare was again in a state of alarm on Wednesday morning when the news was quickly disseminated that the body of a man had been found at the bottom of the notorious Darran Precipice at the far end of the village, and a sad story came to light. The victim was Mr. Emlyn Davies (married), 3 King Street, who had been missing from his home since Monday morning. He had been unemployed for some 5 months and was unhappy in this circumstance because he was by nature an industrious and active type, always revelling in a job to do, and the easy life was not for him." 35

Even those families with men at work often found the times harsh, and frequently found themselves denied anything other than the barest essentials needed to ensure that enough workers survived to keep industrial life turning. The following essay, written by a woman in a mining village near Newbridge in 1938, is a dignified illustration, and a searing indictment, of the state of many families in the valleys at this time:

"What I think of life:

Married woman, One child - age 36 - go to church acasionley

(1) I am quite satisfied with life but not with the surrounding of which we have to live, as we have not suficient to live on and the conditions of our home make us full discontented. we would like to have more children to make our happiness complete but our circumstans wont let us as during the period of pregny I know I could not get the things I would require in the way of extra foods and clothing that we as mothers require.

(2) Do I desire a change?... Of better housing accommodation and nurseing homes for us to bring our children and also a higher wage for my husband as we would be more happier and contented in our home. I think this thing can be brought about by the Labour movement.

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35 Ibid., 13.8.38.

(3) I am Labour through the influence of my husband, finding that my duties at home as denied my chances to visit any meetings it just means to me that being denied of the faccalities of going to these meetings and I have to rely upon my husband as a guide in this matter.

(4) What would I consider a satisfactory wage is about £4 a week as I could get suffent food and clothing and also a little spending money." 36 (sic)

The reasons for the faith which the author of the essay professed in the ability of the "Labour movement" to bring her an improvement in food, clothing and housing were listed very precisely by the author of this second essay: (also written in Monmouthshire during 1938/39)

"I am now 51 years of age I remember back to 45 years ago. at that time my dad being a miner he worked long hours in Winter. He only seen Daylight on Sunday. And I only seen him on that day. And my 2 sisters also worked on surface at Pit. I saw them on Saturday afternoons and Sundays. Having to be in bed early then as small boys. I also remember 1898 coal strike. Having to go to bed with-out food and walking many miles nect day to beg some My dad used to work 3 days a week for Council then and get a food ticket for 1/6 per day worked to keep 6 of us. Breaking stones for Roads. then came by turn to start at Pit - 6/- a week 10 hours a day and then came 8 hours. What a joy. that seemed And then 7 Hours and Being a Man then I thought I was still in for Better Times. All these were broguth about by my dads paying into a Trade Union. after the Great War ending in 1918 things grew worse. every year since that time I have been out of work now for many years. Regards the Future. I would like a Job. Under Nationaliseation. of this Country's Industry's & Equality for all. It would be my life's Best wish Realized." 37 (sic)

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- 36 Essays, set and collected by G.H. Armbruster in a Monmouthshire mining village during 1938/39. Taken from Armbruster's "The Social Determination of Ideologies: being a study of a Welsh Mining Community." University of London unpublished thesis, 1949, p. 261.
- 37 Ibid., p. 262.

Operating within communities which possessed, sometimes in large measure, this sense of historical perspective, it was far from difficult for Left-wing speakers and journalists to find sympathetic audiences. The parallels which they drew between conditions in the communities of South Wales and those in the fascist states were clearly appreciated by a workforce which had experienced the successive traumas of mass unemployment, the spread of enormous coal combine companies, and the application of the Means Test.

The Communists, particularly after the acceptance by thier Party of the new Comintern line of co-operation with Socialist parties in a united front against fascism in the Spring/Summer of 1934, were especially adept at recognizing and exploiting certain controversial issues around which they could build a political platform.

An example of this was the attempt by certain Communist councillors in Aberdare to persuade the Trades and Labour Council of that town to boycott the Coronation celebrations in the Spring of 1937.

The "front organisation" used by the Party for this "campaign" was the Aberdare Unemployed Centre's Advisory Board which sent the following resolution forward for debate by the Council:

"Surely we are not going to allow a gaudy spectacular show to compensate for the misery heaped upon the backs of the unemployed! Surely, grown up socialists and trade unionists are not going to allow this vulgar, bawdy veneer of a rotten social system to conceal from them its true purpose, even to the awful extent of giving it their support.

If its true purpose is known then it is the duty of all to directly boycott it, and more than that to organize an oppositional show which will be nearer to reality. Let us parade our malnourished children, our foot-sore and mental-worried women folk; our unemployed comrades in their miserable footwear and shabby clothes. Let us parade our poorly paid workers, old-age pensioners and recipients of the PAC. Let us also parade our peace-loving desires in opposition to the show of soldiers and instruments of destruction. We say it is the duty of our council to do everything in its power to oppose these coming celebrations." 38

Such resolutions contained all the hallmarks of "United Front" authorship - the crude, but effective, contrast of the "vulgar" opulence of British royalty placed against the "miserable" poverty of the Welsh unemployed; the clear inference that the coronation was but another means of diverting the working class from the appalling problems which surrounded them; the image of royalty as a "bawdy veneer" used by capitalism to give its decaying system a shiny exterior; and, as a punch-line, the inclusion of an attack upon the evils of British militarism.

Most important of all, however, was its advocacy of "action" - marching in the streets, parading the poverty in order that the people themselves experienced the contrasts and contradictions which accompanied a lavish coronation in a time of severe economic depression.

Indeed, it was this advocacy of direct action by the adherents of the United Front which most clearly marked them off from the Right and Mainstream of the Labour Party. The Communists and ILP-ers were seen "to be doing something".

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38 Aberdare Leader, 17.4.37.

They were, of course, joined by many Labour Party members and by a few prominent M.P.s and Labour intellectuals like Aneurin Bevan, Stafford Cripps, Harold Laski, F.J. Jowett, H.N. Brailsford, and Fenner Brockway; but the men who were seen, most consistently, to be advocating the cause of the workers - be it in the pit-manager's office, the Court of Referees at the dole, or in the colliery compensation office - were inevitably the Communists or ILP-ers.

The truth of this statement will become more clear as we move, in the next chapter, back towards a narrative of events in the South Wales coal industry during the four years or so preceding the invasion of the Soviet Union by the Germans in the Summer of 1941.

## Chapter Three

### Coming to Terms with the Powell Duffryn Coal Company

In December, 1934, the General Secretary of the SWMF, Oliver Harris, received a letter from Tom Rees, the Secretary of the Cwmneol Colliery Lodge Committee, which referred to difficulties encountered by the Lodge in organising its part of the Federation's winter campaign against company unionism. It describes eloquently some of the harsh realities encountered by union organisers and officials across large sections of the coalfield during the 1930s, and, moreover, it emphasises that the union's rank-and-file was by no means straining at its leash to take part in spontaneous demonstrations of coalfield solidarity:

"Mr. Oliver Harris,

Dear Sir,

I am requested by my Committee to express our deepest dissatisfaction with the Payment made for services rendered during the tendering of notices Re. the Taff Merthyr Dispute.

The whole of our Committee were out on four occasions in very bad weather for two hours each time and we are given a Cheque for eight shillings to cover it all. It has already cost our Lodge four times this amount, which we knew was much too small, but we were anticipating better treatment from the Executive.

It is very difficult at all times to keep sufficient members on our Committee so that we can function owing to victimisation and Tyranny whilst the few faithful members are now stating definately that they are not prepared to function any longer. The payment given is less than 2d. per hour, and they openly state that a Trade Union which cannot consider its workers better than this is no better than the worst Multiply Firm\* in the Country.

Hoping that you will give this matter your most serious reconsideration.

I beg to remain.

Yours faithfully,

Tom Rees. Sec."<sup>1</sup>

(sic)

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\* Rees was using the expression "Multiple Firm" - a variation on "Combine".

<sup>1</sup> SWMF Files; University College, Swansea. Correspondence between SWMF Central Office and SWMF Lodges, Cwmneol envelope, dated 29.12.34.

Cwmneol colliery had been in the possession of the Powell Duffryn company since the 1870s. Along with the Aberaman and Fforchaman collieries, it formed part of the hard core of Powell Duffryn property and influence in the Aberdare Valley. By the 1930s, the three pits were regarded by miners from other pits in the valley as constituting quintessential examples of the "P.D. System" - as Powell Duffryn's brand of management was known.<sup>2</sup> Cwmneol, Aberaman and Fforchaman earned for themselves reputations as pits where men were "brutalised" into forfeiting their dignity and self-respect.<sup>3</sup> They were compared unfavourably with pits situated higher up the valley. In Trecynon, for example, ex-Bwllfa Dare miners claimed that Federation unity, relations between management and men, and even the men's "language", deteriorated after Powell Duffryn took over the pit and introduced some of their workmen from "the bottom end". (i.e. from the communities around Aberaman).<sup>4</sup>

It is extremely difficult to test the accuracy of such subjective assessments. Information relating to the quality of day-to-day pit life is rarely available and, whilst references to unco-operative officials or even to physical conflicts between men and officials sometimes surface in Lodge minutes, few provide anything like enough detail to define and to compare degrees of "brutalisation" inside collieries. Apart from the occasional work of autobiography, realist fiction or documentary film relating to pit life in the 1930s,<sup>5</sup> there exists very little published material which compares in this respect with a confidential survey, undertaken during the early months of 1938

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2 Recorded interviews, Trecynon, April, May, June, 1975.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 See, esp. the work of B.L. Coombes.



by the executive of the SWMF, of the state of union membership and effectiveness in the Lodges of collieries belonging to the Powell Duffryn combine.<sup>6</sup>

The Federation's reasons for ordering this survey were never made public. The reports which the Investigators produced were distributed to a small number of high-ranking Federation members only. There was no publicity surrounding the survey and the reports were never the subject of open debate within the main body of the union. One of the men appointed as an Investigator, Bill Paynter, explained that the survey was undertaken:

"Largely because of the low membership in the miners' union, and because of the reports that the Executive Council were getting about the attitude of Powell Duffryn colliery managers, and, indeed, the whole of the higher management of Powell Duffryn, to lodge activists.

I don't know how true it is," he continued, "but reports were coming in that it was possible to have a situation - and I know, in the Aberdare Valley, actually ... - where whole committees could be sacked, or people who stood up against management.\* And this was a period when there was mass unemployment. It was possible to get replacement of mining labour quite easily in those days and there wasn't strong trade union organisation to defend people who were victimized and a lot of that was going on in Powell Duffryn collieries. And so it was decided to have this kind of an investigation.

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\* Will Paynter is possibly referring here (in an interview recorded Sept. 9th, 1976) to the dismissal of an entire lodge committee by the Powell Duffryn Agent for the Aberdare Area, J.A. Price, in 1934. Dr. Alistair Wilson, G.P., of Aberdare, talked of this incident in an interview, recorded March, 1976: "... Price sacked the whole of the Lodge Committee in the Gadlys. (River Level Colliery) Of that Lodge Committee, there are still two people in Aberdare, one of whom is Willy Lloyd, the other of whom is Will Jenkins. They (Powell Duffryn) were able to clear out the whole of a militant Lodge Committee without any real difficulty. This was a measure of the position."

6 "Report of Investigation Into Conditions of Employment at the Powell Duffryn Collieries, And Into the Administration of the South Wales Miners' Federation Lodges within the same group." 1938. University College, Swansea, SWMF Files.

"And, indeed, the Investigation revealed the sort of conditions that did apply - the ruthless attitude of Powell Duffryn in the field of labour relations.

I think they were the most advanced company in the South Wales coalfield as far as mining technology at that time was concerned, but in the field of industrial and human relations they were ruthless."<sup>7</sup>

Paynter claimed that many Powell Duffryn employees were plagued by a sense of job insecurity which bred union apathy and non-unionism. These, in turn, did little to strengthen the case of Horner and his executive in their efforts to convince the owners that the SWMF was the only organisation on the coalfield which genuinely represented the aspirations and demands of the majority of working miners. It was Horner's opinion that weak lodges, apathy and non-unionism encouraged those coalowners who advocated continuing with the toughest line possible in their dealings with the Federation.

He recognised, moreover, that the toughest of these tough-liners were the managers and directors of Powell Duffryn. In the light of this, he might have been forgiven had he nudged the Federation towards a policy which involved less direct conflict with P.D.s. But this was not Horner's style; his appointment as President signalled an escalation in the campaign which resulted, by the beginning of 1938, in the eradication of Company Unionism in South Wales. It also signalled the instigation of more vigorous responses by the miners' executive to the problem of attempting to stimulate trade-union activity in the weaker Lodges and Areas of the coalfield, and particularly in those under the control of Powell Duffryn.

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<sup>7</sup> Recorded, London, 9.9.76.

1936, the year of Horner's appointment, saw Bill Paynter elected to the Executive Council of the SWMF. He later described the year as being a "watershed" in terms of the Federation's efforts to drag itself back to a position of real power. The Powell Duffryn survey was designed to facilitate this progress: "It was part of a recognition", said Paynter, "that we had to have within these more powerful combines an equivalent organisation to stand up and survive against the coalowners."<sup>8</sup> Combine Committees operated throughout the coalfield during 1936, but their influence and effectiveness varied considerably from company to company and area to area. The Ocean, Cory and Amalgamated Anthracite combine committees included amongst their leaders men of considerable organizational ability and courage, but they were far from being typical representatives of Welsh combine leadership; Bill Paynter summarised the situation in the following way:

"It's got to be said that the leadership of some of the Combines was not very militant. For instance, the leadership of the Powell Duffryn Combine was anything but militant for a long time...

Some of the officials of the Combine were the old, respectable, chapel-deacon type of reactionary trade union leadership. And I would say that they dominated in the Powell Duffryn...

...There was no security then for the fellers who were working in the pits, and there was a reluctance on the part of masses of miners to be identified with militant union activity, and even with trade union organization, unfortunately..."<sup>9</sup>

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8 Ibid.

9 Ibid. The Secretary of the Ocean Combine Committee, for instance, was Alf Davies, later the President of the South Wales Miners' Union. The Secretary of the Cory Combine Committee was Archie James, a member of the Communist Party, and later the Compensation Secretary for the South Wales Miners' Union.

Horner singled out the Powell Duffryn Company for special attention because it was that company which appeared, during the 1930s, to provide the clearest indication of the shape of things to come. Powell Duffryn's managerial and financial influence extended right across the coalfield,<sup>10</sup> and it continued to spread, even after the outbreak of the Second World War. Its centralizing and rationalizing policies posed a threat, not only to the traditional "customs and practices" of the pits which it acquired, but to the future of whole communities.

Despite a temporary revival in the demands for some coals during the mid-'Thirties, the prospects for continued production were by no means bright in 1937. Horner was aware of the implications of a further market depression. (It came, of course, in 1938, continued into 1939, and was only relieved by the upturn in demand which resulted from the British and French industries being placed on a war footing). It was by no means certain in 1937 that the SWMF would be able to retain its newly-regained power and status if, once again, mass redundancies debilitated its rank-and-file support. Moreover, Horner was aware that a further recession would mean the closure of all but the most efficient of the coalfield's collieries and that the most likely candidates for survival were the pits of Powell Duffryn and the other great combine companies, for it was only these organisations which possessed the required capital and expertise to rationalise and centralise their production.

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10 See footnote 31, Appendix 2.

A team of special Investigators was therefore appointed and dispatched to the Rhymney, Aberdare and Rhondda Valleys, where most <sup>of</sup> the P.D. pits were situated. The whole project was recognised at the time as constituting a considerable departure from accepted trade-union practice in as much as it implied clearly that Horner was making public certain of his doubts concerning the competence of some of the Federation's full-time officials in the field. For the Investigators' work would involve, amongst other things, a considerable amount of what was regarded by those under observation as "excessive snooping" into the previously sacrosanct affairs of Miners' Agents. To investigate such men on their own "patches" was to run a real risk of upsetting individuals who still retained considerable local influence in Federation politics. For a known Communist to order his Investigators to nose into the affairs of men who might, for example, be solid chapel-deacon pillars of the constituency Labour Party was to beg trouble.

Edmund Stonelake was such an official. He had served the union for over thirty years, and been a member since 1898 in the Aberdare Area. In November, 1936, he stumbled on the fact that two of Horner's "agents" were "nosing around" the Aberdare Valley, examining the position regarding the employment of boys - without his prior knowledge or co-operation. Stung to retaliation, he wrote the following letter to Oliver Harris:

"I feel that these visits and this Press publicity (the local paper had stumbled on the "agents" at about the same time as Stonelake) is not only a reflection on us, but quite possibly may make an already difficult and delicate position even more difficult. (publicity at the right time and in the right place may be a very good thing: but at the wrong time and the wrong place can be a very bad thing.)

The conditions of labour at our collieries (the Bwllfa collieries) as in most collieries in this area, are certainly not anything like what we would wish to see them, but I am prepared to say they are very much better in our pits than in some pits I know of ... We have been able to stem (or control) the tide to some extent."<sup>11</sup>

Edmund Stonelake's sensitivity to possible criticism was understandable, for what emerged from the 1938 Investigation was not so much a picture of wholesale neglect of duties by union officials, as a panorama of managerial injustice and petty tyranny operating in a landscape of dilapidated trade-union defences.

#### The 1938 Investigation

The Report of the Investigators was divided into three parts - one for each area "governed" by Powell Duffryn's three main colliery agents. They were as follows:-

- (a) The McVicar Group, centred upon the Rhondda.
- (b) The D.A. Hann Group, centred upon the Rhymney Valley.
- (c) The Frank Hann Group, centred upon the Aberdare Valley.

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<sup>11</sup> Letter from Edmund Stonelake to Oliver Harris, 14.11.36., SWMF Files, Swansea.

<sup>12</sup> See page  
List of P.D. Collieries.

12 The collieries visited by the Investigators within each Group, together with workforce totals and union membership totals at each colliery, were as follows. (according to the Report)

(a) Within the McVicar Group

Colliery		Number of Workers Employed	Number of Union Members
Trane		500	452
Brittanic		not available.	"A good lodge...not long a P.D. pit
Lewis Merthyr		not available.	"A good lodge..."
Blaen Clydach	C.C.C.	500	400
Llwynypia	C.C.C.	not given	"99%"
Bryncae		900	686
Maritime		not given	"Fair..."
Cwm		540	449
Naval	C.C.C.	not given	"Fairly Good ..."
Cambrian	C.C.C.	not given	"A good lodge..."

"C.C.C." signifies member of old Cambrian Combine Committee.

(b) Within the D.A. Hann Group

Bargoed House Coal	not given	"Considerable difficulties"
Bargoed Steam Coal	900	797 "Not good"
Elliot's	1,174 employed 274 unemployed	"Very bad"
Tynewydd	not given	180-200
Pidwallt	not available	
Groes Faen	not available	1,100 9inc. unemployed)
Pengam	230	121
Brittainia	not available	"Good"
Ogilvie	1,000	"Very badly organised." (600)
Albion	1,150	785
Abertridwr	not available	"85%"
Abercynon	not available	1,530

(c) Within the Frank Hann Group

Tirherbert	400	350
Tower	950	850
Bwllfa No. 1	608	400
Bwllfa No. 2	650	520
River Level	770	450-500
Fforchaman	not available	
Cwmneol	500	420
Aberaman	600	509
Mountain Ash Mechanical	300	296
Deep Duffryn	734	686
Navigation	"Not available"	
Cwmcynon and Abergorki	600	460
Merthyr Mechanical	"Not available"	
Plymouth	500	300
Merthyr Vale	1,150	"95%-98%"
Tylorstown	550	"98%"
Ferndale	840	"95%"
Mardy	330	"95%"
Duffryn Rhondda	1,300	600

The McVicar Group was investigated by W.H. Crews and John Davies, the D.A. Hann Group by Will Paynter and D.R. Davies, and the Frank Hann Group by Will Arthur and Albert E. Bennett.

It is immediately apparent, upon reading the Reports, that, in terms of trade union effectiveness, the best organized pit lodges were those of the Rhondda pits of the McVicar Group, especially those pits which comprised the old Cambrian Combine.<sup>13</sup> The weakest lodges were almost certainly those of the pits centred on the Rhymney Valley in the D.A. Hann Group, and in particular the large, productive pits like Ogilvie and Elliott's - both of which had workforces drawn from very wide catchment areas.

Within each Group there were some pits which were particularly well organised. They were characterised by a high percentage of paid-up members and by their ability to function within the pit as a "normal" trade-union branch - i.e. with some degree of recognition and co-operation from the management. Such a pit may well have been bordered, however, by another whose workforce was "represented" by a lodge committee which was forbidden by management to carry on any form of union business on the colliery premises without first applying for and receiving management's permission. Certain lodge committees were not granted the right, by management, even to form Checkweighers' Committees - as, for example, at Tower Colliery.

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13 The Cambrian Combine Committee had been formed in 1909-1910 to counter the challenge posed by the spread of D.A. Thomas's coal "empire". The pits which were named in the 1938 Report as belonging to the Cambrian Combine (but working at this time within the much larger Powell Duffryn Combine Committee - Powell Duffryn had acquired the pits in 1935) were Blaen Clydach, Cambrian, Naval, and Llwynypia.



The Report indicates that, generally speaking, it was those lodges which previously had held a reputation for efficient organisation and for a readiness to take industrial action which continued to function most effectively as SWMF branches during the 1930s. Lodges of this calibre were very much in the minority in the pits of the Powell Duffryn company. To find out why, the Federation's investigators examined a very wide range of pit and union activities - from wages and methods of payment in individual pits, to the methods of collecting union contributions.

#### Wages and the "Grading" of Mineworkers

The main emphasis of the Investigation was placed upon obtaining a clear picture of the wages situation in the mines under review. The Aberdare Investigators, however, found their task an extremely difficult one as a result of what appeared to be deliberate attempts by the Powell Duffryn management to mystify and confuse the process by which miners were allocated their "grades" or status within the pits.

By the beginning of 1938, mineworkers were graded from A to D. Grade A was the lowest grade - usually the Daywage labourer's grade, and grade D the highest - usually the grade for skilled Colliers.

Grading affected all rates of pay, whether it be normal shift work or overtime. Under Powell Duffryn's "Dot" payment system for overtime, for instance, a Grade A worker would find himself eligible for time and a quarter payment, whilst someone on Grade D would find himself on time and a half.

The Investigators found that, with regard to Grading, the general position in the Aberdare Area, and in the Powell Duffryn pits as a whole, was "entirely unsatisfactory". They were of the opinion, for instance, that the workmen in the Aberdare pits had not in the past received, and were still not receiving, the wages they were entitled to under the Conciliation Board Agreement of April 5th, 1937.

During the signing of that Agreement, the coalowners had received much favourable publicity ~~from~~<sup>for</sup> their apparently magnanimous offer to begin payment of the increased wage-rate before the old Agreement had run out. To the disappointment of the Federation's negotiating team, however, this magnanimity was regarded with extreme suspicion by most of the members of the coalfield's Lodge Committees. If the subsequent behaviour of Powell Duffryn was typical of the way in which the owners applied the new Agreement, the suspicions were well justified.

By with-holding the payment of newly agreed rates until grading disputes were investigated and settled by arbitration, the Powell Duffryn Company succeeded - by various means, including temporarily down-grading men and tasks - in saving themselves considerable sums of money. The Company also succeeded in confusing the wages issue by attempting constantly to re-grade tasks at the same time as they introduced new systems of work and production. Colliery Lodge officials, when they attempted to challenge this re-grading, found themselves hamstrung by the terms of Horner's 1937 Conciliation Agreement which stipulated that grading disputes should be submitted automatically to an agreed process of arbitration if they could not first be resolved at pit-level. The intransigent

attitudes of Powell Duffryn management ensured a constant flow of grading cases for arbitration, with the result that long delays occurred almost inevitably before any of these disputes were settled - even though many of them were of a minor nature. The effects of such delays upon union members were rarely conducive to the promotion of effective and concerted union activity at the point of production.

At River Level Colliery in the Aberdare Valley, for example, the Federation investigators observed widespread resentment amongst the rank-and-file towards their elected Lodge officers. It had flourished as a direct result of the Lodge Committee's inability to negotiate, within a reasonable time, settlements of disputes concerning grading. The Investigators reported, for instance, that a list of re-grading cases had been submitted to management early in June, 1937. Apart from a meeting held for the Committee to submit evidence one month later, nothing was forthcoming from management for a very long period. In consequence of the delay, the River Level workmen were reported to be:

"...hostile to the Committee and Lodge Officials. Men who have been since the new Agreement doing work for which they are entitled to be re-graded are refused the higher grade. Men who do periodical work in higher grades are refused a higher rate for the days involved. Wagemen who are periodically filling coal are paid their wage rates, i.e. Grade A, B, C, or D." 14

At Tower colliery, which is situated at the northern (top) end of the Aberdare Valley, the investigators found many instances of boys being paid boys' wages, despite the fact that they were employed on men's tasks. Similarly they cited an

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14 "Report of the Investigation", op.cit. Frank Hann Group, p.8.

example of 24 men who had been signed on at Tower as Packers but who were employed regularly with Repairers and Rippers. These men were still paid at the "Grade A" rates, and not at the higher rates obtainable on the usual Ripping and Repairing Grades ("C" and "B" respectively).

In the neighbouring Tirherbert colliery they found that all disputes regarding grading were submitted to Arbitration. During the ensuing negotiations men were systematically shifted to less responsible jobs. This, argued the Investigators, prejudiced their claims. Fforchaman Lodge members, further down the Valley, were "very bitter" about the situation which prevailed in the colliery whereby a large number of Repairers could be dropped periodically from Grade D to C on the basis that they had not been employed "standing rings" during one particular week. This presumably meant that management considered the task of standing a ring (a comparatively new technique at Fforchaman) worthy of being classified as "Repair" work, whilst any of the myriad other maintenance tasks were classifiable only under inferior categories.

"Labourers are packing and are working with repairers, but are paid Grade A. It is possible for men to be paid Grade D or C for alternative weeks. The Lodge Committee are very bitter because of the above situation. All local efforts have not succeeded in any way affecting this position."

The Investigators came to the conclusion that, because of the fact that a great many individuals had not, for one reason or another, specifically claimed the higher grades that they were due, that there must have been a very large number of workmen who were paid less than the rates provided for in the 1937 Agreement.

Arbitrary Price Lists and the Fixing of the Stent

This reticence to claim rightful grades reflected itself in the widespread phenomenon of Wagemen filling coal. The work of Day-Wage Labourers did not, under the 1937 Agreement, include the filling of coal. That was a task reserved for the collier and his assistants. Yet the practice was so prevalent throughout the Frank Hann Group that it was obvious to the investigators that the company, in deploying sometimes whole shifts of day wage labourers to fill coal, had not, except on rare occasions, met with any organised opposition.

Anyone attempting to abolish the filling of coal by Day-Wage men in the Aberdare pits in the 1930s would immediately have found himself confronted with a considerable number of daunting obstacles, ranging from the threat of dismissal, to the task of challenging a whole range of company policies concerning production and work-organization; for the practice of Day-Wage men filling coal was closely linked in Powell Duffryn pits with the way in which colliery managers frequently exercised their (almost) arbitrary right to determine the length or "stent" of working face.

Company officials were able to so arrange lengths that they made it almost impossible for the collier to complete his stent. The company would then order day-wage labourers to finish the job for him, arguing that, unless the next cycle of operations was able to begin, work on subsequent shifts would be held up.

The whole problem of how best for a workforce to defend (or relinquish) its pit "customs and practice" was highlighted by this problem. At Bwllfa No. 1, for instance, where lodge

membership in 1938 was 400 out of a total of over 600 workmen employed<sup>15</sup>, the method of working was classified by the investigators as "Machine cut intensified."

In the Bute seam, which varied in height between two feet four inches and four feet six inches, the company designated each stall as being 12 yards wide. One principal collier, one adult, and two or more boys would work this stall. The output varied from two to four tons per man employed at the coalface.<sup>16</sup>

Prior to the introduction of a cutting machine in 1931, the cutting price was 3/3.8d. per ton where coal was four feet thick. Upon the introduction of the cutting machine, the Company introduced an exclusive price of 1/10½d. per ton. The Colliers had to stand all timber and cogs when ordered. The method of working and of payment was introduced without consultation with the Committee of the workmen.

Often, these new working methods were not even accompanied by a new price list at their time of imposition. At Tower Colliery, in 1938, the price list still being referred to in the Nine Feet seam was a very old one which had been rendered inoperative by the change in the method of working. The men had asked for a new one as far back as the middle of 1936, but had not received one by the beginning of 1938.

Similarly, at Tirherbert, the SWMF Investigators found that the price lists operating were "very old" and that the Company had maintained the tonnage prices after the change of

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15 Ibid., p. 12.

16 Ibid., p. 6.

working had made them inoperative. At this Colliery the stent was fixed by management at 15 yards in the Gorllwyn Four Feet seam and 22 yards in the Gorllwyn Twenty Inch seam and the Graig Twenty Inch seam. The methods of working were classified as "Coal cutters in Stalls intensified.." <sup>17</sup>

In the Gorllwyn Four Feet seam four <sup>r</sup>of five people were employed in a stent of 15 yards; of these, there was one principal collier, two or three boys and an adult who was paid at the Day Wage labourer's rate - Grade A.

The method of working was a very mixed one. In circumstances where the day shift failed to clear the stent of coal, the afternoon shift would commence on the coal, and after clearing the cut would then proceed with ripping the top. If the Rippers failed to clear the rippings, the night officials would then "send men or boys, or men and boys," to finish the ripping. The principal Colliers who were working on the different shifts and who were pooling, were then responsible for the payment to the men and boys concerned. Men on the nightshift who might work in four or five places during the week, had to go to all the principals concerned to receive their wages, so that one man could have five "pay tickets" in the hands of five different principals. The task of collecting wages under these conditions was often a difficult one, and the investigators noted that men frequently failed, through confusion or disagreement with the principles, to collect the full wages due to them. <sup>18</sup>

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17 Ibid., p. 2.

18 Ibid., p. 3.

At Fforchaman pit, the investigators reported the situation as follows:

"...Invariably the wagemen on the afternoon shift commence working on the coal and are employed for some hours. They are then sent back to do their ordinary jobs and are paid their normal Grades. The normal position is that stents cannot be cleared, therefore wagemen must be brought in to clear the face."<sup>19</sup>

This method of working and of payment was responsible for a great deal of divisive bitterness amongst the workmen, not only because men found it well nigh impossible to assess their wages accurately, but also because the system operated in a manner contrary to any Seniority procedure.

A principal collier might have been as young as 21, and many were under 30 years of age. His assistant, paid only on the Grade A Wage-Labourer's scale, might have been, and often was, 30-45 years of age. The Investigators found that, in many collieries, skilled Colliers were employed as Assistants. "These men were paid Grade A wages despite the fact that they had a lifetime's experience as Colliers." And this was not a declining practice - a leftover from the bad old days which followed the defeat of 1926; the Investigators' report stressed that the problem was "growing rapidly". In Merthyr Vale colliery, for instance, they found a situation whereby if Colliers were absent Wagemen were compelled to substitute; if they refused, they were sent home.<sup>20</sup> The Investigators recommended to the SWMF Executive Council that the grade of Collier's Assistant should be abolished. In addition, they found that in several of the Frank Hann Group of collieries

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 12

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 27



it was a regular occurrence for one Collier to have charge of three or more boys - despite the Federation's demand that a Collier should have no more than one boy under his charge.

#### Nourishing the Seeds of Sectionalism

An examination of some of the systems of working and payment which Powell Duffryn imposed in its pits during the 1930s makes it difficult to escape the conclusion that the company was consciously adopting and enforcing policies which were designed to fragment and to destroy any effective "solidarity" which its workforce might have retained in their individual pits during the depressed years which followed the defeat of 1926.

Allegations of "favouritism" were rife.<sup>21</sup> Company officials were said to have regularly placed their "blue-eyed boys"<sup>22</sup> to work at the best places on the coal face. The measuring of work-completed was found by the Investigators to have been extremely arbitrary. At Fforchaman Colliery, for instance, pieceworkers on the Gellideg Section were employed at a machine-cut coal face, loading coal onto a conveyor. The method of measurement/payment was the notorious "Yardage/tonnage" which was imposed by Powell Duffryn in many of their pits during the 1930s: "The Company allocate the yardage in accordance with the number of panels under each man's control. The number of panels vary from one to three, each panel is eleven feet long. There are 65 men employed on the "M" Conveyor, the output is

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21 Recordings made in Trecynan, Hirwaun, Glynneath, Aberdare Glais and Merthyr, September, 1975.

22 Ibid.

approximately 500 tons per shift. The Price List is a very old one, but because of the change in the method of working it is not operative. The men find that although they have been given 58 and two thirds square yards for a given week, the tonnage payable would be 10 tons 11 cwts. In the following week 58 square yards would give them 15 tons 15 cwts., whilst on the Conveyor Face during the same week another man could have received 14 tons for 32 square yards. A large number of pay tickets were produced giving proof of this. Men who have 3ft.6ins. of coal are paid the same yardage for the same length of stent as men who have 2ft.6ins.

"In the Gellideg, a Collier can do 22ft. by 4ft.6ins. and find himself under the minimum wage, whilst the Collier in the next stent has received for the same work, over the minimum."<sup>23</sup>

The Investigators found not a "single instance" where the workmen were satisfied with the system of calculating wages: "As to the tonnage prices involved, it is interesting to note that invariably the workmen have had thrust upon them, without discussion, the rates that are alleged to be the basis of earnings."<sup>24</sup> Except for a few isolated instances, the Investigators found that tonnage rates had been introduced without consultation and agreement with the workmen. In many instances, the company had ignored the protests of workmen and lodge committees and simply gone ahead with stipulating the tonnage rate to be paid, the width of the face, and the number of men to work in each width. It was in rare cases only that the Investigators found evidence of Powell Duffryn

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23 "Report of the Investigation", op.cit., p. 13.

24 Ibid., p. 37.

management inviting the lodge committee to take part in discussions regarding the introduction of new methods of work and payment.

For the greater part of the 1930s, the company's managers assumed an air of authority which seems sometimes to have verged on the despotic. Again, the Fforchaman colliery provides a fairly typical example. Long standing mutual agreements between the Coal Owners' Association and the SWMF had provided for the automatic payment of a bonus shift to colliers who succeeded in working five consecutive shifts out of five, or six out of six, in any one week. At Fforchaman, however, the Investigators reported that the bonus shift was not being paid to Colliers:

"The utmost difficulty", they wrote, "is often experienced in getting five for five or six for six for the evening shift per Collier. This has been going on for some considerable time...

In December, 1936, and January, 1937, the men on "A" Conveyor were refused the bonus shift and were paid five for five or six for six. The deputation met the Manager and met with a refusal. Mr. Owen Powell, the (Miners') Agent, then met Mr. Price, the Company Agent, and the case was settled. (This case, approximately 40 men involved). Immediately this was settled these men were transferred to the day shift, and the "M" Conveyor men were transferred to the night shift. In February, 1937, these men were refused the bonus shift. The deputation again succeeded in getting payment. After this settlement, the "M" Conveyor men were then sent on the day shift, and the "A" Conveyor men sent back on the night shift. In June, 1937, the Company again refused to pay the bonus shift. A deputation from the Lodge, and later the Miners' Agent, failed to settle this case. It was then sent to the Disputes Board at Cardiff. In October, 1937, the "T" Conveyor men in the Seven Feet Seam were refused the bonus shift. Both the Committee and Mr. Owen Powell failed in their efforts to get this payment. Nothing has been heard of this case since." 25

The confusion and frustration engendered as a result of the introduction of such Powell Duffryn "systems" as Tonnage/yardage manifested itself in a great deal of petty bickering and back-biting amongst the rank and file.<sup>26</sup> Suspicions of favouritism mingled with fears of dismissal to produce an atmosphere hardly conducive to militant industrial unity in the pits of Aberdare.

Idris Jones, an ex-Powell Duffryn miner, recollected how the company appeared to nurture fragmentation in the ranks of the miners by creating obvious "categories" of workers: some were favoured with security and more productive workplaces, others- especially those who arrived daily in droves from the dole-offices - were treated as "expendables", men to be employed or sacked at will:

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26 Recordings made, Sept. 1975, op.cit.  
See Correspondence between SWMF Headquarters and Fforchaman Lodge, SWMF Files, Swansea.

The "Yardage/Tonnage" system of payment, as it was operated within Powell-Duffryn collieries, presented a great many problems to the Federation - not the least of which was the problem of defining it clearly in the first place. In River Level Colliery (also known as Gadlys) for example, face-workers employed upon yardage-tonnage worked both hand-cut and machine-cut methods, employing conveyors and machine-cutters, in seams of 2ft.9ins. and 4ft.6ins. They were paid 2/4d. per ton hand-cut and 1/8d. per ton machine-cut in both seams. In the 2ft.9ins. seam, the length of each panel (or stent) was 6ft. and each man was generally allocated four panels, though variations were often found. In the 4ft.6ins. seam, panels varied from one to three, each panel being 11 ft. All cuts were 4ft.6ins. The bulk tonnage was divided by the number of panels on the conveyor face and colliery officials made the allocation of tonnages for payment without consultation with the workmen. The Federation reported in 1938 that they found it impossible to relate the payable coal output to wages as the rate payable per square-yard varied from 8 to 12cwts. Some dockets were produced in 1938 giving 6 cwts. per square-yard machine-cut and hand-cut on the same conveyor for the same week.

The Checkweighers and Lodge Committee reported that they had no method of checking the tonnage payable and that it was therefore impossible to relate the large coal output to wages. The length of the stent was at the discrimination of the Company. All old price lists had been discarded and the new (yardage-tonnage) method of calculating wages had been introduced throughout the colliery by the Company without consultation with the Federation Committee or the workmen.

"You had to be well in with the officials...", alleged Mr. Jones, "I remember when we were sent from the dole to Fforchaman colliery - and what a ramshackle hole that was. They'd put you in a place where there'd be terrible spillage. You'd look at it, and it'd break your bloody heart: all shambles it was. Well, you knew that P.D.'s favourites were in the best places, but you'd go in there and put your place right, and by damn if they wouldn't move you to another ramshackle hole ... they'd just give you hobblers see."27

Idris Jones' allegations - that Powell Duffryn utilized the technique of employing men on a temporary basis to improve face positions only to move them onto another "bad place" when the task was completed, and to replace them with safe, reliable company "favourites" - were repeated to me many times during interviews with ex-Powell Duffryn miners. The method of dismissing the "expendable" also seemed quite standardised. With minor variations, the procedure ran as follows:

The miner would arrive from the dole and would be directed to a part of the face which needed "tidying". He would then have to clear out spillage, set fresh timber, and generally get his working place straight. This meant that he would be unable to cut coal quickly enough to earn anything above the minimum wage, since clearing out a "workhole" was not regarded by most P.D. officials as payable production work. Another ex-Powell Duffryn miner, Brew Davies, describes what seems to have regularly occurred when the "expendable" claimed his wages:

"...wherever you went, if they took you on, they'd put you in the worst places. You'd slog your guts out getting the place straight for days on end, and when you'd come up to the top office thinking "Oh well, I've earned my money...", you'd find that according to them you'd earned under the Minimum." Pointing to his mouth, Brew Davies continued, "Once you opened this, you were finished. There were too many men in this Valley,

walking their feet off from Hirwaun down to Abercynon who had no chance of getting jobs. They were operating a blacklist. Mind, there were some who were doing alright; they were getting the money. It was the same old method...Divide and Rule. Give a certain section a bit more and you can crack down in other places. If you went into the offices and demanded your right money, and you were a bit of an agitator and had a bit of a mouth, well ... you were back down the dole, means-tested, the lot. They told you straight: "We got ten men waiting for your job mate...", and if you were kicked out you were victimized from Tower Colliery down to Abercynon." 28

The extremely high levels of unemployment which prevailed in these communities ensured that whenever Federation activists managed to hold down their jobs, they found themselves faced with the task of having to fight continuous defensive actions in order that they might prevent the Company achieving its supposed aim of crippling the miners' union by fragmenting the workforce's solidarity. In the pits where P.D.'s "Yardage/tonnage" system was introduced, the position of the union (regarding "fragmentation") was made worse by the fact that Yardage/tonnage was worked in conjunction with a system known as "Overlapping Shifts".

"Overlapping Shifts" meant, in effect, that groups of men began and ended their shifts at many different times during the 24-hour cycle of work. The simple three-shift system of work was greatly modified so that men might begin the Monday morning shift at 6.30 a.m. and the Tuesday morning shift at 8.00 a.m. There was no security as to the duration of the shift. Sometimes it might commence at 8.00 a.m. and finish at 4.00 p.m., and this

would be the accepted time for commencement and finish for a period of perhaps four weeks, then a re-arrangement would be made and the shift would commence and end earlier or later. The Investigators reported that, "Often men would present themselves for work and would have to return home because the time for commencing the shift had been changed."<sup>29</sup>

This practice made for a great deal of inconvenience in the home of the miner and, perhaps more importantly from the point of view of trade-union activity, it often involved increased isolation of workmen from their comrades. "Varied-time" tended to disrupt the traditional procedures which the rank-and-file had evolved at individual pits for the purpose of expressing dissatisfaction at the colliery offices. For example, it proved to be very difficult for the day shift to communicate a grievance to the afternoon shift, in the hope of precipitating a joint action, if the times of arrivals and departures of groups of men on each shift were widely staggered.

In regard to wages, the Overlapping Shift for Colliers complicated the wage-system (where Yardage/Tonnage was the basis for calculating wages) to such an extent that "no-one could define the method of estimating the different tonnages allocated. This caused friction between the different shifts."<sup>30</sup>

The Investigators pointed out that by combining the "Overlapping Shifts" with "Yardage/tonnage" in pits where demarcation lines were loosely drawn, the Company managed to create conditions of friction

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29 "Report of the Investigation", op.cit., p. 36

30 Ibid.

between various grades of men. For example, Daywagemen, because they were sent to work on the coal for a part, or the whole, of a shift, became involved in the already complicated wage system of the Colliers, the Colliers, in turn, argued that they were being "imposed upon" in as much as they were being forced to pay wages to Daywagemen and Boys which were almost impossible to calculate accurately; thus at Fforchaman colliery, "Boys who have been employed on the Gate-end have been booked in with a Collier on the Conveyor Face who has been told by the Overman that he has entered 20 yards of hand-cut coal at 2/5 per ton in that Collier's account. This means that the Collier concerned has benefited to the extent of 10/- or 15/- over and above what he had to pay the Boy. The full value of the coal booked as hand cut is then deducted from the gross weight filled on the Conveyor Face, thereby making the whole of the Colliers on this face responsible for the excess."<sup>31</sup>

The seeds of "Sectional" animosity can remain dormant for long periods in collieries in which the workmen's union functions efficiently and effectively, but in the sudorific conditions created by Powell Duffryn management, they germinated and resulted in the proliferation of a variety of sectionalism which had always been regarded by the Federation as constituting a particularly serious threat to the promotion of healthy collective action: namely, sub-contracting.

Eight months after the Investigators' Reports appeared on the desks of the Federation's Officers, the following news article appeared in the "Colliery Guardian":

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31 Ibid.



"Assuming that the old practice of subcontracting in colliery work was being re-introduced, the SWMF Executive Council, on Thursday, October 5th, directed Mr. W.H. May, miners' agent for the area concerned, to meet the representatives of the Powell Duffryn Associated Collieries and to report back to the next meeting of the Council. Representatives from Mardy, Ferndale, and Tylorstown lodges alleged the growing prevalence of the system of subcontracting. Certain classes of work normally done by the ordinary workmen, repairers and others are now stated to be let on contract, and the same person would thus employ from one dozen to three or four dozen men." 32

May, the Miners' Agent, would not have had to search far for evidence to prove or to disprove the allegations of the lodges. The Investigation Report of January/February, 1938, had clearly outlined, and roundly condemned, the prevalence of sub-contracting within the P.D. pits. The practice was particularly dangerous, as far as the Federation was concerned, because it tended, invariably, to throw the onus for negotiating wages and conditions onto the individual members of the sub-contracting team.

Such a team would often consist of a Contractor, several of his friends or family (or both) and a number of other workers hired on a more "impersonal" basis. This consistency usually ensured that a combined action by the team against the Contractor was far from common.<sup>33</sup>

At River Level colliery, all the main roadways were driven by drivage gangs or teams, each of which numbered between 8 and 20 men apiece. The Contractor in charge was responsible for paying the wages of the whole of his particular gang. All the men excepting

the contractor

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32 Colliery Guardian, 14.10.38.

33 Recordings made in Trecynon, Hirwaun, Glynneath, Aberdare, Glais and Merthyr, Sept. 1975.

were paid Grade A - Daywagemen's - wages. The Investigators reported that "Some of these Contractors have been keeping as much as 10 days in hand ... During recent weeks, however, some of them have been persuaded by the Committee to abandon this practice and pay on the basis of a normal week in hand. One Contractor still continues the above practice, and the men are very anxious that the whole matter be investigated."<sup>34</sup>

Subcontracting was one of the six major problems referred to in the Conclusion of the 1938 Report as needing the immediate attention of the executive committee of the Miners' Federation. The Investigators appointed to examine the Aberdare Valley pits, Will Arthur and Albert Bennett, summed up the overall situation as they perceived it by remarking that:

"In view of the foregoing Report it is not surprising to learn of the extreme difficulty of organizing the workers engaged as Colliers into the Federation. The whole function of a Trade Union in relation to Colliers has been rendered almost useless. The older Colliers are almost despairing of the ability of the Federation to recover its lost prestige in regard to protecting the interests of the skilled Collier.

We are of the opinion", they continued, "that there has been considerable neglect on the part of responsible Officials in allowing the present position to develop. The E.C. should have been made aware of the circumstances under which the Colliers employed at this Group of Collieries were working. The E.C. should be responsible for:-

1. Restoring the right of the Lodges to negotiate under the terms of the Conciliation Board Agreement -
  - (a) Price Lists
  - (b) Methods of working, including length of stents, etc.

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34 "Report of the Investigation", op.cit., p.9.

2. The abolition of yardage tonnage.
3. The abolition of the grade of Assistant Collier.
4. The abolition of sub-contracting.
5. The right of the Colliers to appoint a person or persons to supervise their interests.
6. The payment of the bonus shift."<sup>35</sup>

Of the six points listed, it is perhaps the fifth which most vividly reflects the battered state of trade union organization in the pits of the Aberdare Valley. It also clearly reflects the autocratic character of Powell Duffryn management.

#### "Rationalisation" and the Erosion of Lodge Rights

The Powell Duffryn Company Agent for the Aberdare Area, J.A. Price, was a man with a reputation for displaying high-handed and authoritarian behaviour during colliery disputes - a reputation which was second to none in the South Wales coalfield. It was Price who provided official "reinforcement" for any colliery manager who ran into opposition from his workmen's Lodge Committee. He was, in effect, the Company's "hatchet-man". And on the evidence of remaining Colliery Correspondence, Verbatim Reports of various Disputes Committees, and a large number of interviews with ex-miners and officials who once worked under him, he seems to have relished his work.

Not surprisingly, his name crops up frequently in the 1938 Report produced by the Federation's Investigators. It crops up most frequently in the sections of the Report dealing with the attack by the Company on traditional Lodge "rights".

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35 Ibid., p. 37.

In their Report, the Investigators listed the following findings under the heading "Checkweighers" for the section dealing with Fforchaman colliery:

"Deductions made from wages, monies banked by the Company. Checkweighers paid by cheque, limit placed to balance at bank 2/6 per week allowed for expenses. No Checkweighers' Committee or Officials allowed. The old Checkweighers' Fund is still £50 in debt, and Mr. Price refuses the right to the workmen to allow the balance to accumulate sufficiently to meet this liability. Every three months a statement of account in relation to wages and expenses must be submitted to Mr. Price, the Colliery Agent, failure to produce same brings about a refusal of the Company to make the deduction."36

A year previously, on the third of March, 1937, the Secretary of the Fforchaman Checkweighers' Fund, W.G. Evans, had received the following letter from Price:

"Dear Sir,

I have met Mr. Owen Powell (the Miners' Agent) concerning the deductions for Checkweighers and have decided that:-

(a) Deductions for Checkweighers will be made on the understanding that each Checkweigher will do his utmost to assist the Coal Industry.

(b) That all their business will be done constitutionally.

(c) That a statement of Accounts or balance sheet will be forwarded to me every three months.

If the above is conformed with deductions will at once commence on receipt of a letter from you stating that a General Meeting of the workmen have agreed to the deduction." 37

It was common practice for Powell Duffryn management to push across this kind of restrictive policy where and when they

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36 Ibid., p. 13

37 Letter, dated 3.3.37.; U.C. Swansea, SWMF Files.

were able. The stipulation demanding that the Checkweigher should "do his utmost to assist the Coal Industry" was typical of the kind of pretext used by the Company to introduce new procedures. Emphasis was always laid upon the need for "progress", and upon the allegedly "altruistic" determination of Powell Duffryn to make the coal industry in South Wales "viable...", to make it "work". It was an emphasis which was to be adopted and continued with great effect by the controllers of the industry after Nationalisation.

In the name of "progress", no Checkweighers' Committees were allowed to operate at River Level, Cwmneol, Aberaman, Tower, Tirherbert, Plymouth, Tylorstown, Ferndale, and a great many other P.D. Pits.

Not only did the Lodges of these pits suffer restrictions concerning the activities of their elected checkweighmen, but some of them were deprived of their traditional right to obtain an immediate interview with their manager or under-manager in the event of serious disagreements arising during day-to-day operations at the pits.

The advantages accruing to the union from face-to-face meetings with management were numerous and formed integral links in the chain of rank-and-file pit "defences". For example, it was common practice for lodge deputations to attempt to re-negotiate price lists when geological conditions rendered the existing price lists inoperable. Thus, if a collier found himself working a "difficult place"-as a result, perhaps of a "jump", "slip", or excessive "clod", in the coal seam - it was

possible for a member of the lodge, or for the lodge deputation, to represent him, or accompany him, in the manager's office if, and when, he attempted to obtain more generous allowances or more sympathetic terms of payment.

It appears that Frank Hann wished to replace this facility with one which involved a more formalised procedure whereby the manager would consult the Company Agent more often and proceed to deal with these "small" complaints in a far more consistent fashion than had prevailed until 1937. Lodge Committee members interpreted this as indicating proof of Hann's intention to replace the men's safeguards (as enshrined in their "customs and practices") and to standardise and centralise still further the Company's managerial techniques.

At Fforchaman colliery, for instance, no deputations were allowed to meet the Management without first of all writing for an appointment.<sup>38</sup> The Management would then reply within a few days giving the date and time for such a meeting.

"On Saturday, January 22nd," the Investigators reported, "the Secretary (of the Fforchaman Lodge) wrote to the Manager asking for an appointment to deal with matters arising from that week's wages. On the 24th January (1938) he received the following reply:-

"Dear Sir,

In reply to yours of the 22nd inst., I shall be able to meet you at 4.30 p.m. on Wednesday, the 26th inst., at the Colliery Office.

Yours faithfully,

W.S. Jones"

"Minimum Wage cases or disputes involving omissions or the dismissal of men must be dealt with in this way.

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38 "Report of the Investigation", op.cit. p. 14.

The (Lodge) Committee and the workmen feel that this procedure is contrary to ordinary coalfield methods, and in consequence are very bitter in regard to this matter. During the current week a minimum wage case involving a workman to the extent of 15/- had to be dealt with in the way described above. This man, therefore, in the event of his claim being granted, cannot receive his wages until the following week. When a deputation accompanies the Miners' Agent to meet Mr. Price, the Colliery Agent, they are not allowed to submit evidence to disprove some of the statements made by Mr. Price. Mr. Price contends that the Miners' Agent is the only person who can be allowed to speak at these interviews." 39

The devaluation of individual Lodge Committee representation was interpreted by the workmen as another attempt to undermine the local effectiveness and power of the Federation. By refusing to discuss workmen's claims with the Lodge Committees, the Company's managers were denying the authority of the employees' elected representatives. This calculated "snub" was compounded by the fact that certain of the managers pursued a policy which involved re-negotiating their employees' conditions of work and payment, not on a "collective" basis, but by interviewing each employee individually. Thus, in 1938, Fforchaman workmen found themselves called into the manager's office one at a time, or else in small groups, in order that they might personally accept, or reject, the Company's new rate for clearing "clod" underground. The SWMF Investigators reported that, "Certain of the men have signed for the acceptance of 1½d per ton as against the 3d per ton specified in the Price List." 40

News of incidents such as that at Fforchaman became common knowledge on the coalfield and served to strengthen those "subjective" allegations which sought to establish a direct

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39 Ibid., p. 15

40 Ibid., p. 14

link between the decline of trade-union effectiveness within collieries and the take-over of those collieries by Powell Duffryn.

### The Bwllfa Disputes

The Bwllfa Dare Collieries came into Powell Duffryn hands as a result of the merger between P.D. and the Welsh Associated Colliers Limited in 1935.<sup>41</sup> Two years of industrial unrest followed the merger - years which saw the Bwllfa workmen involved in disputes, the causes of which ranged from dissatisfaction with price lists, to prolonged arguments over whether or not men were legally allowed to stop work to attend the funerals of comrades who had died in pit accidents.

Two particularly acrimonious disputes, both of which involved attacks by management on pit custom and practice, serve to illustrate very well the apparent determination of the Company to "discipline", as well as to standardise, the pits which it acquired during its rapid Inter-War expansion.

The first of these conflicts began during the Spring of 1936, and it involved what might have appeared to contemporaries to have been events of a rather trivial nature.

A letter was received in May from the Miners' Agent for the Aberdare Area, Owen Powell, by Oliver Harris, the General Secretary of the South Wales Miners' Federation. It referred to the "Posting up of Notices at Bwllfa No. 2 Colliery", and read as follows:

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<sup>41</sup> See Appendix I, pp. 13 and 14



"For very many years up to quite recently, it was permissible for the Federation Lodge to put up notices re. "Show Cards", General Meetings, etc., etc. Some weeks ago the Glass Cases which were used for the purpose of holding the posters, etc., were pulled down, and the Management informed the Workmen's Committee that they could not allow any further notices of any kind to be posted up on the colliery premises. It is contended that the Company are violating the Conciliation Board Agreement by their action, and I shall be glad if you will kindly bring the matter forward at the next meeting of the Joint Disputes Committee, with a view if possible to the old custom and practice referred to being restored."<sup>42</sup>

The matter was brought before the Joint Disputes Committee. The Company deemed the controversy important enough to despatch one of its most distinguished and active Directors, W.M. Llewellyn, to represent its interests, along with the formidable Company Agent, J.A. Price, and the Bwllfa colliery Manager, G. Barling. They were opposed on the Federation's side by Owen Powell, Edmund Stonelake, T. Lucas and M. Richards. As was usual with the Committee's hearings, however, the proceedings were largely dominated by the joint presiding incumbents, Sir Evan Williams (the President of the Mining Association of Great Britain, and a Director of the Powell Duffryn Company) and Arthur Horner, the President of the South Wales Miners' Federation.

Sir Evan began the proceedings by outlining the situation regarding the posting of union notices at pit-heads:

"The general custom at these Collieries and throughout all the Collieries in the Coalfield, pretty well, is that notices, before they are put up on the Colliery premises shall be shown to the manager. There is no prohibition in regard to putting notices up, generally speaking, but they must be shown to the Manager, and if a notice is not one which is critical in its nature - if it is one which affects the ordinary working of the Committee at the Colliery, or a notice

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<sup>42</sup> Letter, dated 28.5.36., SWMF Files, University College, Swansea

of some event which is to take place - it is allowed to be put up." 43

Horner pointed out that the Bwllfa workmen had been presented with the glass notice cases 20 years earlier by the former owners of the mines, the Llewellyn family, and that the problem now was not one of having to submit notices for management's approval, but one of no longer having a board of any description on the colliery premises upon which to stick union notices - be they hostile to management or not.

The verbatim account of the Joint Disputes Committee's hearings emphasises the fact that both owners and union had recognized the underlying significance of the issue under consideration. The union realized that a decision in favour of the owners would result in another success in the latter's efforts to erode the power of the lodge committees and to "standardise" union-management negotiating procedure to suit their own requirement:

" MR. ARTHUR HORNER: The notice board has been taken away now, and the men are prevented from putting notices up.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: What do you have to say about this matter, Mr. Price? The complaint is that you refuse to allow the men to put up notices at the Bwllfa No. 2 Colliery.

MR. J.A. PRICE: We are only doing the same there as we are doing at our other collieries, and we do not allow anything to go up except that which we agree to.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: There is a complaint that you have taken away the notice board on which the notices used to be put up.

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43 Verbatim Report of Joint Disputes Committee Meeting, SWMF Files, University College, Swansea.

MR. OLIVER HARRIS: There were two glass cases put up by the old Company, but when the Powell Duffryn Company came along they took those two glass cases down and told the man: "No more notices are to be posted up".

MR. J.A. PRICE: Not without our permission.

MR. OWEN POWELL: At this Colliery there has always been a custom, until the last few months, for the men to put up notices when they wished to do so.

MR. W.M. LLEWELLYN: Only with the concurrence of the Manager. It was always understood that notices could only be put up by mutual agreement with the Manager.

MR. OWEN POWELL: You have never objected to it before.

MR. W.M. LLEWELLYN: I do not know of a case where there has been an objection, but it has always been done conditionally upon there being a mutual understanding in regard to the matter.

MR. OWEN POWELL: The bills the men want to put up now are the same as they used to put up -- notices of general Meetings and things like that -- nothing revolutionary, I can assure you.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: I should think, if you convinced the Manager of that, there should be no difficulty. This is really too small a matter for us to deal with here.

MR. OLIVER HARRIS: It is not a small matter from the point of view of our people.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: We have no powers to deal with a question of this kind here.

MR. ARTHUR HORNER: It is a question of custom.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: It is not a question of custom with the Agreement. I am quite sure that the Company will do what is reasonable in regard to the matter, as they do at all their other Collieries.

MR. OLIVER HARRIS: It is not saying very much for the Powell Duffryn Company to say that they will be as reasonable at this Colliery as they are at their other Collieries. I understand that they are taking the same attitude up as they are taking up here, at all their other Collieries.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: It is the attitude we have taken up at all the Collieries in the Coalfield.

MR. OLIVER HARRIS: Most Companies take a reasonable view in regard to notices being put up. Of course, if there is anything of an extreme nature put up, the Company might object.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: If a notice of an extreme nature was put up, the Company would probably take it down.

MR. OLIVER HARRIS: The attitude of the Powell Duffryn Company is quite different from that of most Colliery Companies, because they will not allow any notice to be put up at all.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: I am sure that is not true, Mr. Oliver Harris.

MR. OLIVER HARRIS: Well, that is our information.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: I am afraid your information is a little inaccurate.

MR. ARTHUR HORNER: Why were the glass cases taken down?

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: That is a matter which does not concern us.

MR. OLIVER HARRIS: It seems to me that this Company are doing everything they can to irritate the men.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: This is something which has nothing to do with us, and it does not arise under the Conciliation Board Agreement.

MR. ARTHUR HORNER: If there is something irritating like this, surely even outside the strict letter of the Agreement, we can expect some reasonable attitude to be adopted in regard to it?

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: If the Manager agrees to the notices, I do not think the Company will object to them being put up -- notices in connection with concerts or lectures, or anything of that sort, I mean.

MR. ARTHUR HORNER: Then the matter will be sent back to the Colliery to be dealt with?

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: The matter is one between you and the Company.

MR. ARTHUR HORNER: It is petty larceny to take down the Workmen's notice cases.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: We were told that the cases belonged to the Company." <sup>44</sup>

The notice boards were replaced only after repeated demands (and pleas) from the Aberdare Area Miners' Agent and Committee. The Company procured assurances from the Lodge that the boards would not be used for the display of notices relating to union "campaigns", or any subject upon which there might conceivably be "contention" between management and workmen.

Management and workmen at Bwllfa No. 2, had, in fact, been in a state of constant contention for over four months prior to the dismantling of the boards.

Having acquired the pit in 1935 from Welsh Associated Collieries, the Powell Duffryn Company re-opened it early in 1936. (It had been closed, due to the depressed state of the coal market, since June, 1931). Daywagemen, returning to their old jobs after a period of four and a half years, found themselves

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

subject to a new shift rate which entailed loss of earnings amounting to approximately 10 per cent. of the 1931 rate.<sup>45</sup>

The Miners' Federation viewed this wage reduction as constituting a breach of pit custom and practice, and pressed for it to be discussed at a meeting of the Joint Disputes Committee.

Sir Evan Williams opened the Committee's discussion on the subject by making it clear that this was a question "in regard to which" he, as a representative of the employers, took up "a very definite stand."<sup>46</sup>

"We are informed", he continued, "that before any of the men in question were employed, they signed a clause inserted in the Contract Book which reads as follows: "The employment of all Workmen having been terminated by proper notice, and the Collieries having been acquired by the Powell Duffryn Associated Collieries Limited, it is hereby mutually agreed in accordance with the provisions of Clause 35 of the Coal Trade Conciliation Board Agreement, that all customs and rates of payments prevailing and operating at this Colliery, under its previous ownership, have been terminated, and that the rates indicated in the following Schedule will apply for the future"-- and those terms were communicated to Mr. Owen Powell (the Miners' Agent) and the men accepted employment on those terms." 47

Horner, in reply, stated that he considered it "a very serious matter if all the Agreements between the men and the Company (could) be altered by dismissing the men and then restarting them in this way..."<sup>48</sup>

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45 Prior to 22.6.31., Bwllfa repairers received 7/6d per shift, Bwllfa Riders 6/2d. In 1936 the rate was 6/9d and 5/9d per shift. Figures obtained from a letter, written by Owen Powell to Oliver Harris, dated 21.5.36., SWMF Files, University College, Swansea.

46 Verbatim Report on Nantmelyn (Bwllfa No. 2) Colliery Dispute; Joint Dispute Committee papers, SWMF Files, University College, Swansea.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

Sir Evan Williams, however, asserted that the position was quite straightforward, and, after making it clear that the miners of Bwllfa Dare ought to have considered themselves lucky that the colliery had been re-opened at all, he went on to insist that, "When there is a change of ownership of a Colliery, there is no obligation upon the new owner in regard to matters of this sort." (i.e. matters affecting the continuity of pit custom and practice).

The verbatim account of the Committee's proceedings records that, at this point, the Federation's General Secretary, Oliver Harris, vehemently challenged Sir Evan's assertion: "MR. OLIVER HARRIS: Well, that is a revolutionary doctrine, if you like!

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: There is no obligation upon the new owner to work the Colliery at all.

MR. OLIVER HARRIS: That may be, but if he does, he is bound by the terms of our Agreement.

MR. ARTHUR HORNER: There is no clause in the Agreement which says that if a Colliery changes hands the old customs do not apply ..."

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: There is no contract at all existing between the new Company and the men until one is made.

MR. ARTHUR HORNER: That is a simple way of destroying all the practices and customs at any Colliery.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: After a Colliery has changed hands, there is no obligation upon the new Owner to work that Colliery.

MR. ARTHUR HORNER: If this Colliery had not changed ownership you would send two Representatives there to find out whether the custom was such as the men say it was. You say that because this colliery has now changed hands, it gives you the right to get rid of the Customs clause in the Agreement.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: You can only vary terms of employment by mutual agreement, and there has been that mutual agreement in this case.

MR. OWEN POWELL: There has been no mutual agreement at all in regard to the matter.

MR. ARTHUR HORNER: You mean individual mutual agreement, Sir Evan?

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: Yes

MR. OWEN POWELL: The workmen have no knowledge of any mutual agreement in regard to the matter; all they know is that they are paid less now than they previously were. I have been speaking personally to a number of men, and that is what they say. The Company have no right to violate any custom at a Colliery.

MR. J.A. PRICE: Here is the Contract Book.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: Just tell us what the position is, Mr. Price.

MR. J.A. PRICE: We have a leaf put in our Contract Book, and what is on that leaf is read out to every man before he signs the Contract Book and he agrees to it before he signs. This is the Contract made between us and the men.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: Have you communicated that to Mr. Owen Powell?

MR. J.A. PRICE: Yes.

MR. ARTHUR HORNER: You take individuals who have been out of work for a long time, and you got them to sign that, before you would employ them?

MR. J.A. PRICE: This is similar to what we have at other Collieries.

MR. OWEN POWELL: The men were not approached in any way in regard to this alteration, and we say the Company have no right to approach individuals on a matter of this sort."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.



Here was the heart of the dispute. In the eyes of the Federation's Representatives, Price's explanation (of the Company's method of placing men under contract) betrayed what they interpreted as a readiness on the part of Powell Duffryn to employ tactics which were both under-handed and deviously opportunistic.

Horner's rhetorical question to Price: "...you got them to sign that, before you would employ them?", emphasised the fact that he considered any attempt by the employers to "individualize" workmen's contracts both dangerous and contemptible. Conditions of severe unemployment exacerbated the danger of the attempts still more; men who had been amongst the ranks of the long-term unemployed were more likely to agree to work for low wage-rates, or in bad conditions, than men who felt secure and confident of regular work. Horner recognised that to allow Powell Duffryn to "standardize" their method of "individually" contracting their employees would be to allow the Company the opportunity to undermine, not just the local Lodge organizations, but entire Coalfield Agreements: the disintegration of either of which would inevitably have resulted in the disintegration, or decline, of the power and status of the Federation itself.

Will Arthur, of the Miners' Federation Executive, attempted to obtain clarification upon the attitude of the Mine Owners towards this question of "individualised" workmen's contracts by suggesting to Sir Evan Williams that such a method of contracting tended to "destroy the whole value of collective bargaining...":

"SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: Our Contract is with the individual, and it is only when we fail with the individual that we get to the next thing. When this Colliery was restarted, it was restarted on an entirely different method of working.

MR. ARTHUR HORNER: The Agreement says: "Both parties hereby undertake that no variation of any practice, condition or custom in existence ... shall be introduced by the parties to this Agreement, except by mutual consent." The parties to that Agreement are the South Wales Miners' Federation -- not just individual workmen -- and the Monmouthshire and South Wales Coalowners' Association.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: The Contract is a Contract between the individual Workmen and the Company, and this Agreement is the Contract between the individual Workmen and the Company ..."

MR. ARTHUR HORNER: We are parties to this Agreement.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: You are only parties to it on behalf of the individual Workmen; the real parties to the Agreement are the Owners and the people who sign the Contract book.

MR. ARTHUR HORNER: No, the parties to the Agreement are the Monmouthshire and South Wales Coalowners' Association and the South Wales Miners' Federation..."

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: This is a question of very important principle.

MR. ARTHUR HORNER: Yes, it is.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: You are only parties to this Agreement on behalf of the Workmen.

MR. ARTHUR HORNER: We are parties to the Agreement.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: Only on behalf of the Workmen.

MR. ARTHUR HORNER: The Federation is a party to the Agreement on behalf of the Workmen.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: ... but the real parties to the Agreement are the men who sign the Contract Book.

MR. ARTHUR HORNER: The Agreement says that in the event of a failure to obtain mutual consent at the Collieries, the proposed variation shall not be introduced until the proposal is brought before the Committee in the manner set out in the foregoing -- but you introduce a new Contract to the individual Workmen.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: The whole basis of the Agreement is that it is the Contract between the individual Workman and his employers.

MR. ARTHUR HORNER: If that is true, there is no value in the Customs Clause of the Agreement at all.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: The Colliery had been idle for  $4\frac{1}{2}$  years and it never would have been worked again upon the old terms; it had to be re-modelled and re-organised so far as methods of working are concerned, and the men there are employed now upon the same terms as they would have been at any other Colliery.

MR. ARTHUR HORNER: They should have been employed on the terms and conditions prevailing at the Colliery until those terms and conditions were mutually varied.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: When the Colliery restarted there were no customs and no contracts in existence at the Colliery.

MR. ARTHUR HORNER: There seems to be no value in the Customs Clause if this sort of thing can be done.

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: There has been a complete change of conditions at the Colliery.

MR. ARTHUR HORNER: You say you can give a man 14 days' notice and then restart him at the Colliery on your own terms?

SIR EVAN WILLIAMS: If the individual agrees, certainly."<sup>50</sup>

Horner's persistent questioning, and Sir Evan's bland final answer can be attributed to the fact that both men were aware that any unemployed miner seeking a job in the 1930s had very few alternatives but to accept work on almost any terms which the employer cared to name.

If the miner accepted work and waited before attempting to challenge his employer's terms, as men had done at Bwllfa in 1936, his position was little stronger than if he had refused the job in the first place, for he faced the probability of dismissal and (if he had been vocal enough in his challenge) of being victimised and blacklisted.

Proof of this form of "punishment" by the employers is rarely easy to find. The chances of uncovering a Powell Duffryn "blacklist" or of discovering written orders for the victimisation of individuals are very remote - despite the fact that large fragments of the collective consciousness of the British working class are littered with specific recollections of blacklistings and victimisations.

The reasons for this lack of concrete evidence are quite obvious. There would, in the first place, have been little necessity for the employer to have written the name of a "troublemaker" down on paper at all. Colliery managers knew

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50 Ibid.

each other and were in daily contact with each other. A phone call, or a word in a colleague's ear, was all that was needed to ensure that "troublesome" individuals were kept out of local pits.

The opportunities available for managers to "compare notes" were plentiful.

Often, of course, all the pits of any size in one area were owned by the same company. This naturally encouraged inter-colliery communication at managerial level. In the case of the Powell Duffryn Company, its managers, besides communicating on a day-to-day working basis, periodically attended the Company's Management Training Centre at Ty Mawr. And, as one would expect, they met each other at social gatherings within the mining communities:- at the more prestigious chapels, for instance, where they and their families would constitute the most "distinguished" elements present in the congregation, or at pubs and clubs which possessed a somewhat exclusive reputation, like the Boot Hotel and the Conservative Club in the centre of Aberdare. In popular recollection, however, the managers were not the chief victimizers; that title was awarded to Company Agents like J.A. Price.

The part which allegations of blacklisting played in sustaining the mineworker's sense of Them and Us cannot be overestimated. Chapter Four will attempt to examine such allegations along with others (particularly those which accused the coal-owners of displaying a "heartless" reluctance to show any measure of generosity or justice in the payment of industrial compensation) which were equally widespread and very influential in reinforcing certain of the class attitudes prevalent amongst

the South Wales mineworkers and their families.

The dissatisfaction with various systems of work, payment, and trade-union representation outlined earlier in this chapter served to provide miners with their most obvious and frequent pretext for taking industrial action. As such it served, usually, to determine the character of his relationship with the South Wales Miners' Federation. For example, a sense of loyalty to the Federation might only manifest itself in terms of high, and active, membership when, and if, the Federation leadership was seen to be tackling issues about which dissatisfaction was being expressed. The SWMF Investigators of 1938 concluded from their research that, as far as a number of important Powell Duffryn pits were concerned, the leadership had not, in fact, devoted sufficient attention or energy to several important and highly contentious issues.

Federation membership had been correspondingly low in these pits. This does not mean, however, that there existed amongst the Powell Duffryn employees any deficiency of animosity towards the Company. On the contrary, as we shall see in the following Chapter, the sense of frustration generated amongst the rank-and-file by the lack of union representation appears to have supplemented those widespread feelings of injustice (which reflected themselves in allegations of victimization and wilful compensation payment-dodging by the Coalowners) to produce amongst many of the Powell Duffryn miners and their families a class identity which was as complete as that of any other group of European industrial workers.

## Chapter Four

### Victimisation, Accidents and Disease : the subjective lessons of class conflict

Some of the tales told of the injustices perpetrated by coal-owners are lies, some are not. Often the details of injustice or outrage have become mangled by time. In the pits, as in all other workplaces, men sought short-cuts and the means of earning more money in less time and for less effort. Pit safety rules were by-passed and broken at least as often by the men as by management.

In their private conversations, miners will admit that pit accidents often are caused by their own errors of judgement. In public, however, they display a lot more reticence. Invariably they will shift the blame for accidents back onto the shoulders of those who employ miners to do their dangerous and dirty work. In these situations, a special order of "moral-justice" manifests itself. Demands are made that compensation for accidents be paid even when there is tacit agreement that the accidents in question were caused (in the immediate situation) by the mineworkers' negligence or wrongdoing. It is pointed out that the miners involved in particular accidents had almost certainly risked death many times previously - and often through no choice of their own. The risks, it is argued, are part and parcel of mining and the coal-owners did themselves little good in the eyes of mining communities by attempting, when it suited their pockets, to forget this basic fact. No other single act was guaranteed to bring as much opprobrium upon the heads of the owners as did their

opposition to the compensation claims filed against them by their injured or diseased employees and by the widows of pit accidents.

Sometimes, false claims were lodged against the owners. I have been informed, by several ex-claimants, of cases in which the fabrication of evidence against the owners was both elaborate and successful. What was conspicuously missing in all of these accounts was a sense of guilt on the part of the ex-claimants. Their past lies are rationalised away as constituting merely the means by which they "got their own back" on the owners. Morality here has little to do with the accepted concepts of legal justice. It has everything to do with the fact that, in popular consciousness at least, the miner was seen as having been "cheated all along the line".

Memories of discontent over alleged under-payment of compensation for accident or disease have provided in the South Wales coalfield a residue of bitterness which is rivalled in intensity, though not in scope, only by the lingering indignation of men who believed themselves to have been unjustly victimised because of their political or trade-union beliefs. The owners, it is clear, were regarded as being "fair-game" for anyone with enough cheek or guile to overcome them in a court of law.

Recollections of grievances concerning compensation and victimisation have dominated most of the free-ranging discussions which I have recorded with ex-mineworkers. That this should be so is hardly surprising. Both types of grievance afforded the "victim" a clearer insight into the class nature of society than he was likely to encounter anywhere else outside of the more radical of



the contemporary political parties. Such experiences formed part of an overall mythology in which the coal-owners were typecast as grasping individuals ready, at the drop of a writ, to snatch the last crust from the mouth of an orphan or widow of one of their victim-employees. It must be remembered, also, that, as Professor Harrison has commented:

"pre-existing class consciousness" may have disposed men "to expect and perceive victimisation and injustice even when they (were) not there". 1

Such mythologising was not limited to the ranks of the miners and their families. The public pronouncements of the coalowners and their officials were shot through with what Professor Harrison has termed "...their lore of fact and fiction respecting malingerers, stupidity and carelessness" amongst their employees.<sup>2</sup> It was amongst the employees, however, that such tales of alleged injustice flourished most obviously. This is hardly surprising, for when a miner was denied adequate compensation for a lost limb or damaged lungs he was denied even the bitter justice of a "fair" sale of part of his productive capacity. Similarly, when he was victimized, he was prevented from selling the only commodity which he owned, his labour power. Both acts served to test, in the most strenuous fashion, the victim's conception of social and industrial justice in a capitalist society.

There can sometimes develop amongst those who see themselves as victims a desire to seek comfort through a ritual

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1 R. Harrison, unpublished letter to K.S. Howells, dated 1.12.76.

2 Ibid.

listing of the iniquities allegedly perpetrated upon them by their persecutors. Few workforces display a reticence to indulge in this trait, and this kind of myth-making was as common in South Wales as in any other coalfield. Tales of individual dignity shown in the face of managerial provocation, for example, could become decorated and supplemented until they emerged, perhaps a decade later, as acts of class heroism.

Similarly, it is not unreasonable to surmise that there must have taken place what Professor Harrison has envisaged as "competitions at the bar to tell the best tale ... of the iniquitous conduct of Powell Duffryn."<sup>3</sup>

It does not pay to become too cynical, however, for the reality which spawned the myths was a harsh one and it is undoubtedly true that there were many who believed themselves to have been cheated, both in and out of the compensation courts. This chapter attempts, therefore, to come to terms with the combined influence upon the collective consciousness of the South Wales mining community of both the myth and the reality surrounding the questions of compensation and victimisation.

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3 Ibid.

### Victimisation

The 1938 Report on the Powell Duffryn lodges stated that, at several collieries within the Frank Hann (Aberdare) Group, workmen had been "...treated so badly that it (was) very difficult to persuade them to accept responsibility in matters affecting themselves and others. The Committee Members (were) selected for the harshest treatment. Because of this position we found some reluctance to submit individual cases for the consideration of the E.C."<sup>4</sup>

The Federation's Investigators reported that even they had experienced difficulty in obtaining information regarding workmen's grievances: "There is a fear that arising from this investigation certain Company officials will take steps to make it impossible for these men to continue working."<sup>5</sup>

To reassure the Federation's members at these pits that it was both safe and vital for them to supply the required information, the Investigators informed the Lodge Committees that the E.C. had given an undertaking that they would "...use the full weight of the South Wales Miners' Federation to prevent victimisation arising from this inquiry."<sup>6</sup>

In certain of the more hard-pressed lodges, however, these "reassurances" were not effective enough to promote even the most inoffensive sense of self-confidence amongst Federation members. During the nine months following the investigation (from January

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<sup>4</sup> "Report of the Investigators", p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

to September, 1938) for instance, the SWMF were unable to find a single plaintiff at Fforchaman colliery willing to proceed with a prosecution of the Powell Duffryn Company over the question of the legality of the Company's "Yardage-Tonnage" method of work measurement and payment. This situation occurred, despite the fact that the Federation had obtained assurances from a number of solicitors and lawyers that "Yardage-Tonnage" was quite obviously illegal.<sup>7</sup>

Morgan, Bruce and Nicholas, Solicitors to the SWMF, informed Oliver Harris, the Federation's General Secretary, that it seemed to them "...a disgraceful state of affairs that men should be victimised only because they claim what is legally due to them."<sup>8</sup>

Disgraceful or not, however, the threat and practice of victimization undoubtedly provided certain sections of Powell Duffryn management with an effective means of imposing industrial discipline right up to, and possibly beyond, the introduction of the Government's Essential Work Order on March 15th, 1941.

The SWMF Investigators reported, in 1938, that there had

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7 At Fforchaman Colliery, there was no pooling of earnings allowed at the coal-face. The Company allocated the yardage in accordance with the number of panels under each man's control. The number of panels varied from one to three, each panel being 11 feet long (in the Gellideg section). There were, for example, 65 men employed on the "M" conveyor where the output was approximately 500 tons per shift. In 1938, the price-list was a very old one and because of the change in the method of working it was not operative. The men found that although they had been given 58 and 2/3rds square yards for a given week, the tonnage payable would be 10 tons 11 cwts. In the following week 58 square yards would give 15 tons 5 cwts., whilst on the conveyor face during the same week another man could receive 14 tons for 32 square yards. A large number of pay tickets were produced giving proof of this to the Federation's Investigators. Information concerning both River Level and Fforchaman was obtained from the 1938 "Report of the Investigators...", op.cit., Frank Hann Group, pp. 8,9 & 13.

8 "Report of the Investigators", p. 8.

been "many" cases of victimization of union officials and rank-and-file members referred to the Miners' Agent and the Executive Council.<sup>9</sup> One case in particular reflected the atmosphere of mistrust, recrimination and suspicion which pervaded certain of the Powell Duffryn collieries. It occurred at River Level (also known as Gadlys Colliery) where, as we have seen, an entire Lodge Committee had been sacked in 1934 by the Company Agent, J.A. Price.<sup>10</sup>

The Investigators reported that:

"William Jenkins who had been employed for some years on the surface and who was a member of the Lodge Committee was dismissed; and after the intervention of Mr. Oliver Harris, was given temporary employment replacing absentee workmen. This man has been employed from one to four shifts during a period of a month, and during this time has been pestered by a coal Inspector who declares that if Jenkins is prepared to carry information from Committees and General Meetings he would receive greater satisfaction in regard to his work. This approach has been made week by week, eventually during the week ending February 12th, he was asked if he would give a written report of the proceedings of a Committee Meeting to be held on Saturday night the 12th, he would be dealt with very kindly. On the Monday the 14th, he was asked for the report. Jenkins replied, that because of illness he had not been able to attend the Committee. He was informed by the coal Inspector that inquiries would be made as to whether or not Jenkins had been present at the Committee, and if he had been present he would hear more about it. He advised Jenkins to keep his mouth shut and keep these discussions to himself. This coal Inspector is a friend of Mr. Price, the Colliery Agent, and meets him once a week on the Colliery. He has a reputation for interfering in the administration of the Officials from the Manager down." 11

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9 Ibid., pp. 8-12.

10 See Chapter 3, p.53

11 "Report of the Investigators", p. 11.

Almost two years after the Jenkins case was reported to SWMF headquarters, and three months after the declaration of war with Nazi Germany, the following letter was received by the Secretary of a colliery lodge which operated two and a half miles to the south of River Level. Far from conforming to the cosy image of Masters and Men "pulling together" for the good of the nation during a period of grave international crisis, the letter serves rather to illustrate the smooth and apparently inevitable transference of peacetime industrial animosity into wartime industrial animosity.

It was written by a Mr. R.J. Evans of Abercwmboi, and in it he claimed that he had been "unable to obtain work despite trying day after day." He had been injured in 1916 and had done light work at pit bottom up to 1926:

"...during the 1926 strike I was very active in the SWMF with the Bell announcing meetings," he wrote, "also a member of the Aberaman Lodge, and when the strike ended, I could not be reinstated. The strike ended in December 1926, but I did not start to work until April, 1927, and then they stopped the Pit and I would not have had work then if it was not for Mr. Owen Powell and Mr. Illtyd Hopkins<sup>12</sup> who had been interviewing on my behalf, and after they had been successful in getting me work, I had to go and see Mr. Price and he told me that he was giving me one more chance to balance my mind and do something good. I replied that I had never done any harm. To answer my opinion, therefore, I believe my case is a victimization. Also the Company is liable owing to my accident, and there are other men doing my job since the Pit has restarted who have not worked at that Colliery at all, and I have been unemployed this last 12 years." 13

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12 Powell and Hopkins were Miners' Agents for the Aberdare Area of the SWMF.

13 Letter to W.J. Watts, Aberaman Lodge Secretary, dated 13.11.39; SWMF Files, U.C.S.

The Company's reply to any possible charge of victimization in Evans' case would probably have included, as part of its defence, the argument that it was not in its interests to re-employ a partially disabled miner who had been subject to long-term unemployment. This Catch-22 "logic" could not, however, have been applied to a case of alleged victimization which was brought to the notice of Powell Duffryn's Aberdare Agent by the SWMF one month after the receipt of Evans' letter.

In December, 1939, the Agent, J.A. Price, received the following thinly-veiled warning from the Federation's General Secretary, Oliver Harris:

"Dear Mr. Price,

A rather serious position has arisen at the Deep Duffryn Colliery over the dismissal of the Treasurer of the Lodge, and which is regarded by the workmen as a case of victimisation because Mr. Glyn Allan has been active in the support of the claims of the workmen and on Federation work generally. In fact so strong is the feeling there, they have asked the E.C. for permission to tender notices which, of course, the Executive Council is very reluctant to grant, but we are instructed as officials to get into touch with you with a view of getting the man reinstated...

As this is the festive Season, I hope you will examine the position as favourably as you possibly can, and assist in removing the cause of discontent at this colliery." 14

Deep Duffryn Colliery was (and has remained) a pit which held a reputation for relatively amicable relations between management and workmen. The dismissal of the Lodge Treasurer by the Company may well have been prompted by the successful campaign against non-unionism which the Lodge had conducted

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14 Letter, dated 20.12.39., Deep Duffryn envelope, SWMF Files, U.C.S.

within the pit during the previous Summer. What links the case of Glyn Allan with that of William Jenkins and R.J. Evans, however, was the obvious readiness of the Company Agent, J.A. Price, to entertain such tactics as victimization in a quite unrepentent fashion. Not for nothing was he known amongst the Powell Duffryn workforce by the nickname, the "Black Prince".<sup>15</sup>

From an examination of even the scant evidence available in the three cases referred to above, it is not difficult to attribute to Price the characteristics of a small-time industrial Machiavelli.

In the case of William Jenkins, Price had apparently encouraged his friend the coal Inspector to attempt to blackmail Jenkins to spy upon, and to betray Jenkins' fellow union members. In R.J. Evans' case, Price had used a crude psychological ploy in an effort to alienate Evans from his political beliefs: "... he was giving me one more chance", wrote Evans, "to balance my mind and do something good." In the case of Glyn Allan, Price's methods were, if anything, even cruder. He searched for a reason to explain the success of the Deep Duffryn Lodge in achieving solidarity in their threatened strike action over non-unionism.<sup>16</sup> He remembered that in the past the Lodge had been relatively quiescent. He

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15 Recordings made in the Aberdare Valley, 1974-76.

16 See Colliery Guardian, 16.6.39., for strike-threats over non-unionism 21.7.39. for report of '100% union membership attained without striking'.



deduced that the "problem" must lie in the Lodge Committee itself, since workers who were previously "docile" could only be prodded into action by "troublemakers". Perhaps, if the Federation had been as feeble in the Cynon Valley in 1939 as it had been in 1934, he would have repeated his action at River Level Colliery five years previously and sacked the entire Deep Duffryn Lodge Committee. But this was 1939, and the Federation was considerably stronger; his coup at River Level could not easily be repeated at Deep Duffryn, so he did the next best thing: he sacked the most able member of the Committee, Glyn Allen, the Treasurer.

Spying, blackmail, betrayal, devious psychology, and arbitrary misuse of power: placed together, they constitute the elements of melodramatic renaissance court drama. Occurring in the context of an economically depressed and socially deteriorating coalfield, however, they served a less theatrical purpose, but one which was far from lacking in grim drama. They served to highlight the workforce's deep sense of disenchantment with what few fragments of "Industrial Justice" remained at the end of the 1930s. Concepts such as those which advocated "a fair day's work for a fair day's pay" and which attempted to instil within pitmen a sense of loyalty for their employers received diminishing sympathy as the decade dragged to a close. The Chairman of the huge Amalgamated Anthracite Company, F.A. Szarvasy, for example, felt that because the situation had become by 1938 so "strained", it was necessary for him to remind his employees that their interests lay firmly with the interests of the Company:

"He hardly needed to reaffirm that he and his Board of Directors were not asking the workers to reduce their weekly earnings in so far as these earnings bore relation to the production of coal or were ancillary thereto" reported the Colliery Guardian in April, 1938, "on the contrary, they wanted them to take home more money, but they did want to feel that wages were not merely pocketed by the workers but that they were truly earned. It was not as if the men's leaders were not fully alive to the position." continued Szarvasy, "...But he realised that they had a difficult task before them, because it was now up to them to so educate and mould the minds of the workers so as to eradicate the feeling of mistrust which had crept into the industry ... It was only then that the workers would put forth their best efforts, not because of any feeling of compulsion or the fear of starvation, but because they felt convinced in their innermost conscience that they were doing the right thing in putting increased effort into their work and thereby maintaining their own livelihood, while at the same time giving an adequate return to those who had helped by risking their capital." 17

Szarvasy had earlier expressed a "fear" that his employees were no longer showing "... that spirit of co-operation which could alone bring success to the policy of conciliation which the management had inaugurated and faithfully carried out for years."

He feared that the Company's workmen

"... were mistaken in their conception of the main problems and that in their eagerness to fight against what they believed to be capitalistic principles of management they forgot what in fact they should be fighting for - namely, the protection of their own homes and livelihood. If you starved the hen you would in due course be compelled to go without eggs." 18

Szarvasy's worries cannot be interpreted as indicating that the anthracite coalfield was thronged with socialist

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17 C.G., 14.4.38.

18 Ibid., 19.4.40.

revolutionaries. In the midst of capitalism's most acute crisis, the great majority of the workforce showed, by their actions, that they were prepared to abide by the laws and economy of the bourgeois state. It was almost certainly the case, that in the eyes of a great many Welsh miners and their families, society stood in need of the radical improvements which might result from a number of fundamental changes in the organisation of production. Nevertheless, the bourgeois state remained for them what Lukacs termed the "natural basis of society". It provided the "ideological foundation of legality",<sup>19</sup> but where its "legality" was most suspect, so its ideology was most vulnerable. After all, there was obviously very little justice inherent in an act of victimization perpetrated by a strong employer upon a weak employee. Such an act smacked of despotism - especially when it appeared that the employer was being aided by the apparent indifference of the State. It would have been extraordinary, indeed, if at such moments at least some of the victimized miners and their comrades did not ask themselves and each other "Well, for whose benefit is the State organized and run?"

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19 Georg Lukacs, "History and Class Consciousness", London, 1971, pp. 262-263.

### Accidents and Disease

If victimization made some men question their concepts of social justice and legality, then the widespread wrangles over miners' compensation for accidents and disease made a great many more men conscious of their true position within the social and economic order of things. The lessons which they learned were direct and brutal. They were taught that if a man was active and strong, then he was of use to his employer for he was a source of production and profit. If, during the course of producing that profit he became disabled or diseased, then he was of no use to his employer. He became, instead, an economic burden, an "unfortunate victim of circumstance", a creature to be cast aside with as little embarrassment to the employer as possible, but to be cast aside nonetheless, like any other piece of useless machinery.

In his autobiography, Arthur Horner stresses the importance of these lessons in determining his own attitude towards the question of nationalisation of the coal industry:

"You would have to live with this problem to understand how bitter we felt. We knew that the coal owners were using every possible device, legal and otherwise, to resist the claims of men who had given their lives to the pits. To me it was a proof, not that the coal owners were worse than other men, but that the conditions of the class struggle in the coalfields inevitably created just this sort of situation.

It spurred me in my determination to fight with all I had, to take the power over the lives of men away from the coal owners." 20

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20 Arthur Horner, op.cit., p. 146.

In 1937, 175 men and boys were killed in the pits of South Wales, and 25,947 were injured.<sup>21</sup> Expressed differently, five miners died and 680 were injured for every million tons of coal raised on the coalfield.

These deaths occurred despite the fact that the year witnessed no spectacular colliery "disasters" of the kind so beloved by newspaper editors.

Measured in terms of the death-rate per 100,000 men employed, the incidence of fatal accidents in British coal mining as a whole fell in the years immediately following the end of the First World War. In the years 1920-21, a record low level was reached of 89 and 87 deaths per 100,000 working. But, as Margot Heinemann has pointed out, "These were also the years when hours were only seven a shift, when real wages in the mines were at their highest point, and when union organisation was at its zenith. The men were in a better position to resist any drive for output at the expense of safety."<sup>22</sup>

The rate rose in 1923 and then dropped again in 1924 when there was a rise in real wages. After the 1926 Lockout, when hours were lengthened and wages reduced it rose again to 107. "In the years between 1926 and 1938 it never again fell below 100, and for the greater part of those years it was over

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21 Annual Report of H.M. Secretary for Mines, 1938.

22 Margot Heinemann, "Britain's Coal", London, 1944, p. 68.

105. In 1938, 872 (British miners) were killed in accidents - 107 for every 100,000 employed."<sup>23</sup>

The rate in South Wales was higher than the national average: roughly 111 men died per 100,000 employed on the field in 1938.<sup>24</sup> Figure 1 illustrates the death rate per 100,000 man-shifts worked in South Wales from 1928 to 1938:

Figure 1  
1928 - 1938



Source : Reports of H.M. Inspectors of Mines, 1928-1938.

23 Ibid.

24 Workforce's average size in numbers for 1938 was 135,000; the death rate per 1,000 employed stood at 1.11. Source: Annual Report, HM Sec. for Mines, 1938 and 1939.

Like the death rates, there occurred no appreciable fall in the rate of non-fatal accidents between 1928 and the outbreak of the Second World War. Like that of fatal accidents, the rate of non-fatal injuries increased sharply after the 1926 Lockout and the rise in hours, and did not really begin to fall until the immediate post-War years. In South Wales, as in the rest of Britain, the greatest number of accidents during these years were caused by falls of ground. (i.e. the roof or sides of the workings falling in). The peculiar nature of the South Wales seams increased the risk of these types of coalface accident<sup>25</sup> and, during the years of "recovery", 1936-37, they reaped a grisly harvest of men and boys.

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25 See, for instance, the 1938 Report of H.M. Inspector of Mines, Swansea Division, p.14.

"It will be noticed in reading these (preceding) accounts of accidents at the face that slips in the coal and natural joints (slants) in the roof, as distinct from induced breaks, are often referred to.

The cleavage in South Wales differs from that in other parts of the country and is known as "slip cleavage". These slips are usually confined to the seam but occasionally run up to the roof at irregular intervals. Their presence in the roof, however, is not often known until it is too late.

Under such circumstances I am of the opinion that props and lids are not adequate support, and this is especially so where, due to local disturbances, slips of more than one kind are present."

Bert Coombes illustrated this roof danger in These Poor Hands:

"Sometimes the roof would fall and leave a hole upwards of fifteen to twenty feet over a wide area. They would clear a gully of about two foot alongside the coal, and we would have to cut past and post it up. We were cutting alongside one of these falls one afternoon, and Tommy was the only one with me. Again we were short of timber - the usual complaint - and no fireman came near to us, for fear that we would insist on him sending help to carry some. I had noticed Tommy had been away for awhile, then he came back and signalled me to stop. I did so, then he explained that he had found some posts at some distance, and he had loaded them into a tram. He could not push this tram along the heading, so he wanted my help - I was the only one he could find.

Everything was silent when we went, and everything was silent when we returned. We were not more than ten minutes away, but in that time over a hundred tons of stone had fallen above the machine. It took the repairers, working at forced speed, nearly twelve hours to clear a narrow way to the front of the machine - where I would have been crouching."

These Poor Hands, op.cit., pp. 124,125.

Some contemporary observers - mainly some of those who stood outside the ranks of management - interpreted the rise in pit accidents as indicating the existence of a link between questions of safety at work and particular external factors concerning poverty and long-term unemployment. The "link" was alluded to at an annual dinner organised by the South Wales Coalowners' Association in Cardiff in April 1937, where, during after-dinner toasts, the assembled guests listened as speakers reaffirmed the Coalowners' stated commitment to the promotion of their employees' physical well-being.

The first speaker placed the onus for the continuance of poverty and ill-health in South Wales onto the shoulders of the miners; Mr. W.B. Davies, Chairman of the Association, wondered aloud whether there existed in the Valleys "anything like the distress" which they, the Coalowners had "heard so much about in recent years." There were, he claimed, "places in South Wales where work (was) available for men who were ready to take it:

"As colliery officials, they were tolerant and considerate to men who had to re-acclimatise themselves to employment after idleness over a long period; but they knew full well that there were men in the coalfield who were not too anxious to get back to work. It should be impressed upon such men that if work was offered and available, and they were fit and well enough to undertake it, they had no right to continue to be a burden on their fellow workmen by receiving unemployment benefit and public assistance relief." 26

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26 Colliery Guardian, 23.4.37. This kind of assertion became very popular in the years 1937-38 amongst Welsh coalowners. Needless to say, it upset not only the long-term unemployed, but also their political and trade-union leaders.  
(continued on page 117)



Footnote 26 (continued)

At a meeting of the Executive Council of the South Wales Miners' Federation in June, 1937, for instance, the Colliery Guardian reported that,

"...amazement was expressed at the statement recently made by Lord Davies, the Chairman, (no relation to the W.B. Davies mentioned above), at the annual meeting of the Ocean Coal Company that there was no reason now why any miner should be out of employment in South Wales. Mr. Oliver Harris, in a statement at the conclusion of the meeting, said that such a remark could only be made in complete ignorance of the situation in the mining valleys. He said that there are at the moment between 30,000 and 40,000 unemployed miners in this area. In the Rhondda district there are about 16,000 men unemployed, and at Merthyr about 12,000. There are similar figures for other localities. If Lord Davies can find employment for these men he added, the Executive Council will give him an assurance that all the men who are now unemployed will be ready to take the jobs offered them. They had not had a single complaint from the Coalowners' Association that they are not able to get all the men they require."

Ibid., 4.6.37.

As if attempting to emphasise further the benevolent character of South Wales coalowners, Iestyn Williams, the owners' chief spokesman on the Joint Conciliation Board, rose, two toasts later, and drew the audience's attention to the sensitive problems of pit safety in South Wales. The Colliery Guardian reported him as saying that he "had always felt what a slander it had been to suggest that coalowners were callous" on the point of safety in mines. Like the hard-headed businessman that he was Williams qualified his point by arguing that the Welsh coalowners had always been ready to spend out on matters affecting safety: "If it were the question of cost that was entered into, anything that could be done to avoid the need of payment of compensation was economically sound, so cost could not be the trouble.." <sup>27</sup>

Disrupting any atmosphere of self-righteousness which might, by this point in the evening, have settled upon the guests, Sir Alfred Faulkner, Permanent Under Secretary for Mines, expressed his "disappointment" that life had been made "no safer in the mining industry" than it had been "...twenty years previously." <sup>28</sup> Responding for the coalowners, Col. G.A. Lewis said that they could not "understand how the total number of fatal accidents in the Cardiff District in the first three months of (1937) had turned out to be double the number of accidents in the first three months (of 1936)." <sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Colliery Guardian, 23.4.37.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

The discussion suddenly turned full circle; the reality of the social distress which the first speaker had been at such pains to play down forced itself back into the limelight. For, in replying to Col. Lewis's expression of mystification, a Tredegar Justice of the Peace, Mr. David Evans, informed the guests that there had been, within the past year, an influx of extra labour. This, he inferred, had brought with it grave problems of safety, for, "Men who had been idle for years came back to work", perhaps having suffered in the meantime considerable physical debilitation, and he had read of "many cases in which such men had been killed in the first few days. That", he suggested, "might account for the accident ratio."<sup>30</sup>

David Evans' statement was an ambiguous one. Possibly, this was intentional. "Physical debilitation" could be taken to have been caused either by a lack of muscular exercise resulting from unemployment, or by a lack of nourishment due to severely decreased income. There may, of course, have been a less contentious explanation ~~the~~ <sup>for</sup> the high death-rate: namely, that the newly-hired colliers were simply short of practice and that in their haste to secure their first wage-packets in years they ignored or forgot some of the most basic safety procedures. It is not unreasonable to assume that the most satisfactory explanation contains elements of all three theories.

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30 Ibid.

However, it is not always the "most satisfactory explanation" (as an "objective" historian might see it) which achieves the greatest popularity; people perceiving of themselves as the victims of a harsh and unjust industrial society will seek different kinds of "satisfactory explanations" for the ills which they suffer than will those whom they cast in the role of persecutors. In the minds of the "victims" there existed a powerful association of images and ideas concerning unemployment, deprivation and the high rate of fatalities and injuries recorded at the coal-face. By its very nature, this association did not have to reflect the true accident statistics with any great accuracy or sophistication. Violent death and serious injury were, quite literally, every-day occurrences in the mining communities. The vast majority of deaths would have occurred, in all probability, whether the individuals involved were physically debilitated or not; it needed only the merest hint that the deaths were in some way associated with prolonged deprivation to spark off a glow of vindication for the "victim"-interpretation in the minds of those who subscribed to it.

For the relationship between ideas about reality itself is not, of course, mechanical but dialectical.<sup>31</sup> The mining population's image of the "reality" of death at the coal-face in South Wales during the 1930s was inextricably linked with

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31 See V.L. Allen, "Ideology, Consciousness and Experience : the Case of the British Miners", University of Leeds paper, March, 1975, esp. p.11.

its image of itself as the victim of blatant social injustice outside of the pits.

This link or association expressed itself with blunt clarity. The title "Powell Duffryn", was always shortened, in common usage, to "P.D.s" - an abbreviation which was invariably lengthened and transmuted during strikes or serious disputes into "Poverty and Death". The jibe was one which stuck : "P.D.s equals Poverty and Death".<sup>32</sup>

This popular image of the controllers of the coal combine companies as callous individuals was reinforced in at least three important ways. The first concerned the attempts by the combine companies to end a practice which was accepted as "normal" on the coalfield whereby workmen were allowed to leave the pits early in order that they might be able to attend the funerals of comrades killed in pit accidents. The second concerned the leniency with which coal owners and mine managers were treated in Court Cases after legal action had been brought against them for wilful breaches of mining safety regulations. The third concerns the common allegation that owners were guilty of hedging and delaying over compensation payments for accidents - allegations which will be dealt with in more detail in relation to compensation paid to the victims of coal-dust respiratory diseases.

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32 Recordings made in Trecynon, Hirw<sup>u</sup>an, Glynneath, Aberdare, Glais and Merthyr, September, 1975.

### Funerals

On the 13th of February, 1937, 398 miners struck work at Amalgamated Anthracite's Tirbach Colliery in the Upper Swansea Valley.<sup>33</sup> The men were demanding half a shift leave of absence to attend the funeral of one of their comrades killed in ~~a~~ <sup>the</sup> pit. Three months later, seven of Powell Duffryn's Cambrian Colliery workmen appeared before Pontypridd magistrates in what the Colliery Guardian referred to as a "test case".<sup>34</sup> They were accused by the Company, which had acquired the Cambrian pits during the previous year from Welsh Associated Collieries, of taking unauthorised leave of absence to attend a funeral. All were found guilty and fined.

A fortnight after the case was heard, the General Secretary of the South Wales Miners' Federation, Oliver Harris, received the following letter from the Secretary of the Bwllfa and Windber Workmen's Joint Committees, Edmund Stonelake:

"Last night I was telling my Committee that having regard to a case in the Rhondda the week before last; where the workmen left early for a funeral were fined for doing so, I feared that we would lose our customary right to a three-quarter day for funerals at Bwllfa No. 1. By a rotten coincidence a man was killed this morning at No. 1....

Now, we have a long standing custom at Bwllfa No. 1 that in a case of fatal accident the pit will stop working at three-quarter shift in order that the men may attend the funeral.

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33 PRO, Lab 34/52, 1937.

34 C.G., 28.5.37.

We have no signed agreement other than an acknowledged custom. The funeral of this man will probably take place next Monday. If I am refused the customary three-quarter shift on the grounds mentioned above what am I to tell the men?

I don't want to advise them to stop working and then get them fined for doing so..." 35

Bwllfa No. 1, like the Cambrian pits, had been acquired by the Powell Duffryn Company in 1936 as a result of their merger with Welsh Associated Collieries. The enthusiasm of Bwllfa's new owners for "disciplining" their employees was already well known to Stonelake and the rest of the Bwllfa workforce. They had experienced during the previous Summer two portentous disputes arising from the Company's refusal to recognise existing "custom and practice".<sup>36</sup> Stonelake's letter makes it obvious that he and his committee knew perfectly well that if they adhered to the old custom of working only a three-quarter shift on the day of the funeral, then the Company would almost certainly retaliate with Court proceedings as they had done successfully in the Rhondda two weeks earlier.

Despite this threat, however, "custom and practice" was faithfully adhered to. The local newspaper reported the events as follows:

"600 miners on the day-shift at Bwllfa No. 1 colliery defied the management by walking out before 1.00 p.m., after working three-quarters of a turn, to attend the funeral of jovial, popular "Billo" Griffiths, workmate fatally injured by a fall of side last week. It was,

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35 Letter, dated 26.5.37., Bwllfa envelope, SWMF Files, University College, Swansea.

before the "amalgamation" the custom of the Welsh Associated Collieries Co., to allow them the privilege to attend, by leaving early, the burials of victims of fatalities at the colliery. The new P.D. Associated management refuse the men this concession and 600 of them took matters into their own hands. Few will be found to blame them."<sup>37</sup>

Deep passions were aroused by this issue. It was not merely a question of needing to "show respect for the dead", although that desire played an important part in determining the men's actions; it was much more an expression of the indignation and distaste which the miners felt when confronted with the raw and blatant quality, as they saw it, of Powell Duffryn's brand of industrial exploitation. The newspaper report reflected this prevailing sense of hostility:

"The men claim that the old privileges stand despite the change of management. But more important than any law or tradition is the spirit of humanity which seems to be disappearing from our pits. Miners, automatons as they have to be underground, are not lacking in human feelings and emotions. A workmate has been taken suddenly (and who may be next?). They want to walk to his grave with him, sacrificing a quarter of a shift's pay, which means much these days. The colliery companies want more and more output in this boom period, and men try to respond. But the spirit of humanity must not perish! Humanity in industry is what the world needs!"<sup>38</sup>

The Powell Duffryn Company contended that a breach of contract under the 1937 Wages Agreement had been committed, and they served summonses on 27 of the Bwllfa workmen who had taken part in the Funeral walkout. The Bwllfa men were joined on

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<sup>37</sup> Aberdare Leader, 5.6.37.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.



strike by upwards of 200 other miners from some of the smaller drifts in the immediate vicinity of the No. 1 pit. On the following Thursday evening, 160 of the 800 strikers assembled in the Trecynon Hall where they were advised by their local Federation officials to return to work and to forward all grievances to the Federation Executive Council in Cardiff who, the strikers were assured, would then take up the issues with management whilst work at the pit continued.

The local newspaper described the scenes at this meeting as "deplorable". The union officials were "assailed by shouts of 'Traitors', and other uncomplimentary remarks. Their advice was ignored, and the proceedings were marked by considerable disorder."<sup>39</sup>

The following morning witnessed a much larger meeting of strikers at which the decision of the previous evening's meeting was reversed and the advice of the Federation officials accepted. This "advice" was based upon what the officials saw as an obligation to abide by the procedure for negotiating grievances which had been formulated and agreed upon by Horner and the Coalowners the previous April. The Aberdare Leader, in its report of the second strikers' meeting, applauded the wisdom of following this "line":

"... the advice of the leaders was accepted. So it should have been. The Federation, now stronger than at any time since 1926, won the new Agreement (i.e.

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39 Ibid., 19.6.37.

the Agreement of April, 1937) the Federation will see that it is observed. It is difficult to imagine what good could have been achieved by a few hundred men striking locally before any real negotiations are undertaken. The Federation's Executive can negotiate better than anyone else, and can take powerful, united action if there is a need for it. The rank and file of the SWMF has declared in favour of unity, yet local hot-heads practice disunity by scorning and slandering their leaders. What's the use of having leaders and a Federation if leaders' advice is ignored and constitutional procedure is abandoned? Let us be glad that common sense prevailed." 40

Despite the vote in favour of their recommendations, however, the local Federation leaders were far from certain that their "line" would prevail.<sup>41</sup>

Their position was made no easier by the fact that a dispute over wage rates and grading had caused 120 Bwllfa men to strike afresh only four days after work had been resumed following the Funeral strike. Once again, Owen Powell and D. Emlyn Thomas, the local Miners' Agents, addressed a mass meeting of Bwllfa colliers and advised them to return to work pending negotiations. Once again, the meeting was marked by "considerable disorder". Powell and Thomas, it was reported in the Aberdare Leader, managed to get a hearing "only with difficulty, there being a general uproar and cries

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40 Ibid.

41 The extreme sense of dissatisfaction felt by the Bwllfa rank- and-file reflected itself in the following letter sent by Stonelake to Oliver Harris shortly after the second meeting: "At a General Meeting of the workmen ... it was decided to ask your E.C. to meet a deputation at your very earliest convenience. The workmen feel that they cannot give up a very old custom of this character without getting definite advice from your Exec." Letter dated 5.7.37., SWMF Files, Swansea.

of 'Traitors', 'You are selling us', and 'We can handle this ourselves', and 'Sit down'."<sup>42</sup>

The strikers voted to prolong their stoppage and to hand in the usual 14 day strike notices the following Monday.

This second strike was seen by many as a continuation of the Funeral dispute. The continuity was quite evident in the men's reasoning and in their justification of their actions. They claimed that the Company was not properly applying the terms of the April Agreement with regard to Grading arrangements within the pit. Similarly, by attempting to change a recognised pit custom such as that concerning funeral procedure without adequate consultation with the Lodge Committee, the Company were breaking the terms of the April Agreement. The men contended that since the Company had broken the Agreement, then they were entitled to do the same.<sup>43</sup>

D. Emlyn Thomas pointed out to the men that "Two blacks would never make a white", and did his utmost, "in view of the gravity of the situation", to get the men to reverse their decision to prolong the second strike.<sup>44</sup> A second vote was taken and the men decided "not to go down" that night or the following morning. The Aberdare Leader reported "general disagreement among the men even after the decision had been arrived at, there being cries of 'Remember the Law', 'Watch your step', which were reciprocated with shouts of 'We'll all go to jail if it comes to that', 'They can't eat us', etc."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Aberdare Leader, 19.6.37.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

A further, and larger, meeting was held on the following morning, and, as in the Funeral dispute, the decision to "stay out" was reversed. Once again, the majority followed the advice of Stonelake, Powell and Emlyn Thomas; there was a return to work and the men agreed to refer their grievances to the SWMF Executive in Cardiff.

Both Bwllfa disputes were taken up and discussed by the Joint Conciliation Board, and both slipped away into the obscurity wherein most economically-unimportant disputes are finally to be located. In the case of the wages and grading dispute, a compromise somewhat more favourable to the union than the previous arrangement was formulated, and in the case of the Funeral controversy, the Summonses were settled "out of court" and the matter referred back to the local officials of both union and management. (Which is to say that little was done about it).

Momentarily, however, the funeral dispute had allowed public expression of some of the more deeply-felt attitudes of ordinary miners concerning the relationship between themselves, as human beings, and their employers. It was an expression of their distaste at the way in which, as they saw it, they were being forced into accepting the role of emotional "automatons" as they had already been forced into accepting the role of productive "automatons" underground.

It was also, for those miners more aware, or more concerned, with wider industrial and political issues, an expression of defiance at the way in which the coal combine firms were eroding

away hard-won "customs" and "practices". As such, the dispute served to emphasise the divisions which existed within the ranks of the miners themselves in the Aberdare area - divisions, the kind of which were to be found through area workforces right across the coalfield.

Indeed, the popular defence at Bwllfa of a pit custom became, as it would become in other pits many times after nationalisation, the pretext for a fierce public airing of ongoing debates within the Miners' Union concerning the attitudes of Horner and later Presidents and their Executives towards unofficial action by the rank-and-file.

The Bwllfa Funeral dispute was only one of dozens which occurred on the coalfield within the first six months of the signing of the April 1937 Agreement. All of these disputes, to greater or lesser degrees, posed to the Federation's Executive problems of discipline, for all of them were unofficial and, as such, all of them infringed the terms of the Agreement.

Horner had stated that his word as a union leader would be kept. "Unity", he argued, must prevail if the Federation was to rebuild and to recapture the power which it had once possessed. This meant that the members of the Federation must, perforce, be ready at all times to abide by their elected Executive's decisions and rulings.

In terms of an over-all strategy, few amongst the rank and file would have cared to argue with the logic of this requirement, but not all situations and disputes in industry are viewed with the perspective of an over-all strategy. Since 1909-10, there had persisted in South Wales what amounted to a fundamental

antagonism between the more orthodox trade unionism of the Federation leadership and that of the lodge organisations. This tendency was not markedly different from that existing, for instance, in the engineering industry. G.D.H. Cole summarized the "built-in antagonism" in the following way:

"Official trade union policy aims at centralization, at the making of collective agreements governing the widest possible area ... Workshop organization, on the other hand, tends to emphasise the grievances which are felt in particular establishments, and to be more immediately responsive to waves of feeling among the rank and file. It also tends to foster the desire for the "control of industry" by putting it into a form in which it is directly related to the actual working conditions in each particular establishment.."46

In the Bwllfa disputes, this advocacy of local "control" and antagonism towards many of the actions of full-time union officials by certain sections of the workforce manifested itself most obviously in the criticisms directed at the Federation officials from the floor at the Trecynon meetings. Allegations of "traitorous" conduct and double-dealing were accompanied by assertions that the Funeral dispute should be left to the Bwllfa men, themselves, to "sort out". (see above) This was not the characteristic behaviour normally expected from members of a lodge which was beset with severe organizational problems resulting from mass unemployment and from a fall-off in active Federation support.

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46 G.D.H. Cole, "British Trade Unionism Today", London 1945 (first published, 1939), p.170.

Like the rest of the colliery lodges of the Aberdare Valley, the Bwllfa lodge had not distinguished itself as being particularly militant since 1926. Why, then, the flare-up over funeral arrangements in 1937?

Some of the reasons have already been set out above. The disputes over the removal of the lodge's notice-boards and over the Contract Book "irregularities" can be viewed alongside the Funeral dispute as being symptomatic of a general feeling of resentment by the colliery's workforce towards the attempts to impose upon them "alien" systems of work and discipline by their new masters, the Powell Duffryn Company. But it was no mere coincidence that the issue which drew forth from the rank and file the most vehement criticism of employers and union officials was the emotive one of "Blood on the Coal", for the image which every mining community holds of itself is coloured by its collective experience of death and disaster within its pits.

Outsiders, especially, have noticed the tendency amongst pitmen to dwell upon the subjects of accidents and death in the mines. When, for example, the Polish economist Zweig visited a Welsh mining community shortly after the formation of the National Coal Board, he was perplexed by the sombre quality which seemed to prevail amongst the miners with whom he came into contact:

"Why do most of them look so grim or, rather, so serious?" I asked.

"Because life in the pits and the colliery village is serious; it is a hard struggle, with certain defeat at the end," came the answer.

"Well, in the end all men are defeated," I joked with them. "We all end by being worn out and weary in body and mind."

"Yes, but there is a difference between pit-life and work in the light, in the fresh air, and in natural surroundings which do not constantly threaten you with danger. Can't you see for yourself the number of disabled men with amputated legs or arms or fingers, or even blind, or with twisted spines or necks, or otherwise laid on their backs?"

"I had to agree that nowhere else can you see the same relative numbers of disabled men as in a colliery village."<sup>47</sup>

The high rates of injuries and deaths were (and still are) accepted by the miner with little more than a shrug of inevitability. As Professor Allen has pointed out, miners regarded non-disabling accidents with "almost complete indifference". He cites one miner who claimed that "he had suffered no injuries although he had lost the end of a finger when it was crushed between a pit prop and the roof."<sup>48</sup> Professor Allen examined this "inevitability" further. He differentiated between the non-disabling accident and the accident which disabled and thus involved a loss of income for the miner:

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<sup>47</sup> F. Zweig, "Men in the Pits", London 1948, p. 6.

<sup>48</sup> V.L. Allen, op.cit., pp. 14-15.



"Disabling accidents are not treated with indifference because they usually involve a loss of earning capacity but they are not seen in any sense as the consequence of a profit-making activity. Miners, when questioned about managerial responsibility for accidents, thought that the National Coal Board was doing its best to prevent accidents and tended to think that they were the consequence of individual negligence. Accidents occurred, they believed, because safety regulations were ignored or simply because some men were 'accident prone'." 49

The miners whom Professor Allen is describing work for the Coal Board; their attitude to their employer would have been markedly different from that of Powell Duffryn's employees, and yet, much of what he reported as being the case in the 1970s was true for the 1930s. Safety in mines was an issue which rarely provoked collective mass-action by miners during the two decades following the Lockout of 1926.

This does not mean, however, that men accepted that they should automatically become mutilated or even die as a "natural" consequence of working underground. They were not afflicted with a peasant fatalism. Their apparent quiescence in the face of appalling accident statistics is explained only by examining the way in which miners perceived their industrial roles in relation, not only to their workmates and to their union, but also in relation to their employers and to the ideology of their employers.

Once again, Professor Allen provides valuable insight:

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49 Ibid.

"Often" he reports, "miners believed that those who suffer from accidents and dust diseases should receive financial compensation, but this is a measure of their acceptance of the phenomena. (i.e. of dust and dangerous working conditions) None attributed economic reasons to the causes of accidents and diseases. They did not state that there is continual pressure to reduce the expenditure on shafts and roadways so that the provisions are usually of a minimum standard. Indeed, when questioned about improving underground facilities they were extremely cost conscious and in this way accepted the employer's definition of the situation." 50

This, says Allen, is a "classic case of the influence of the dominant ideology", since it reflects itself in the policies of the miners' union: "The union, in the main, has been apathetic about safety and even when it has participated in safety campaigns it has been to focus attention on individual responsibility."<sup>51</sup>

Paradoxically enough, the foundations for the acceptance by the workforce of this ideology were laid in the 1930s by companies like Powell Duffryn whose attempts to increase productivity and to rationalize production methods led, not only to a general speed-up of work-rates, but also to the construction of straighter coal faces and larger roadways to accommodate the new cutters and conveyor systems which the Company introduced into its pits.

Such developments drew grudging admiration from its workforce, even from those who counted themselves as "solid" union men. One such individual, Byron Howells, described the

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50 Ibid., p.16.

51 Ibid.

changes which he witnessed in the Bwllfa colliery in the mid-'Thirties, during the period in which Powell Duffryn acquired the colliery from its old owners, the Llewellyn family, controllers of Welsh Associated Collieries:

" The roadways were increased in size. They put in bigger arches; there was more width in which to work in the roadways, and this, naturally, seemed to lessen the accident rate ...

Under D.R. Llewellyn, their main concern was with production; they introduced machinery but had no regard for the hazards of dust. P.D.s reversed all that. Their number one concern - after their horses of course - was ventilation." 52

This "admiration" by the workforce for Powell Duffryn's engineering improvements was, however, moderated by a scepticism which had resulted from the experience of witnessing consistent opposition by the coalowners to attempts by various agencies, including successive governments, to improve legal safety requirements in the mines.

The height and width of roadways, for instance, had been a contentious issue right through the inter-war period:

"... low, narrow, twisting and 'switchback' roads are known to be the cause of many accidents, but there is hesitation to lay down standards for straightening and enlarging them because of the cost in the older mines.

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52 Recorded in Rhigos, March 1975. Powell Duffryn would, quite understandably, have taken "good care" of their horses; trained pit ponies were harder to come by during the 1930s than trained colliers.

...proposals to fix a minimum height even of 5 feet were resisted at the Royal Commission by Sir Evan Williams of the Mining Association, who refused to admit that, if a minimum had to be fixed at all, it need be more than 4 feet." 53

Miners like Byron Howells appreciated the improvements when they came, but he was under no illusion regarding their purpose:

"P.D.s wanted more efficiency. With wider roadways they could get bigger tubs in near to the face so as to cart more coal out each time. Better ventilation allowed you to get at coal which the Llewellyns hadn't been able to touch before. Their main purpose, these improvements, were the same as they'd always been: more profits." 54

There was a general feeling amongst the ex-P.D. miners that I interviewed that the Company chose to obey many of the safety regulations only when it deemed it worthwhile in terms of its operations to do so. Indeed, there is little doubt that, even by the late 1930s, the existing laws on mine safety were often imperfectly enforced, largely because the owners were unafraid of the possible consequences of transgression:

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53 Margot Heinemann, *op.cit.*, pp. 77-78.

54 Recorded in Rhigos, March 1975.

"The penalties for Breaches of the Coal Mines Act are so light", wrote one observer, "that they hold no terrors for the company, and the average fine (including costs) imposed for breaches of the Act is about £4 - which is about as serious a deterrent as a pin-prick to a rhinoceros." 55

To many miners, the enforcement of law and the distribution of justice by the government's agencies must have appeared a supremely cynical process.

Two incidents, both of which occurred in Powell Duffryn pits during June, 1938, illustrate anomalies in the enforcement of mining regulations of the type which tended to cause scepticism and dissatisfaction amongst the coalfield's workforce.

On June 6th, 1938, four men died as a result of a gas explosion in Tirherbert Colliery at the "top end" of the Aberdare Valley. The explosion occurred when an accumulation of gas was ignited by an unauthorised instrument for testing the current in electric cables.

During the subsequent Coroner's Inquest, the jury was informed that the four victims had died when working in a

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55 Margot Heinemann, op.cit., p.78 : "In 1938 there were only fifty-four convictions against owners or managers, and the total fines were £399.10s. In the same year there were 300 convictions of under-officials and workers, and the fines were £416. Thus the average fine for the company's side was under £6 and for the worker's £1.7s. The fines would thus certainly be a deterrent to the workers, but not to the management."

heading roughly 20 inches high, along the floor of which ran an electric cable carrying 500 volts which was used to power a coal cutter.

In giving evidence, H.M. Inspector of Mines, Capt. Carey, said that in his opinion there had been insufficient ventilation to carry away any gas which might have escaped into the heading as a result of the operation of the coal-cutter. Capt. Carey's opinion was seconded by the Chief Inspector of Mines in the Cardiff Division, Capt. G.S. Rees, who had visited and inspected the scene of the accident some hours after it had occurred.

The Company denied that their ventilation system had been inadequate, and called upon their own pit officials as witnesses in an attempt to prove their case.

The Coroner, to the mystification of the Miners' Federation representatives present, informed his jury that it was "quite a clear case". He told them that they had to ask themselves whether they could attach "any serious blame to anybody who was living for what had happened." The jury retired for 35 minutes and then returned to the court to announce that, although "more strict supervision should be kept over those in charge of the electrical apparatus", nevertheless, they felt that there was "not sufficient evidence to attach the blame to anyone."<sup>56</sup> No Powell Duffryn director or official was censured or fined in any way.

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56 Information obtained from the account of the case in the Aberdare Leader, 24.12.38.

Not satisfied with this verdict, the widows and dependents of the dead men were encouraged by the legal advisers of the Miners' Federation to press charges against the Company for negligence and malpractice. This they did, their case appearing before the Stipendiary Magistrate, Mr. J. Bowen Davies, K.C., at the Aberdare Police Court some three and a half months later.

Once again, the Inspectors of Mines expressed the view that, in their opinion, the Company were guilty of providing insufficient ventilation. They also inferred that un-named, or unknown, Tirherbert Colliery officials, had probably removed certain vital evidence from the scene of the accident before they, the Inspectors, arrived at the colliery. (The missing evidence was a piece of electric flex and a sheet, or sheets, of brattice cloth - the latter used for ventilation purposes.) Once again, however, the court found in favour of the Company.<sup>57</sup>

Still extremely dissatisfied, the widows and dependents took their case to the Glamorgan Assizes. There, Mr. Justice Lewis heard the plaintiff's counsel, Griffiths Williams, express the opinion that "it was a highly suspicious feature of the case that the essential things which caused the explosion should be missing". He suggested that "Someone must have removed these things before the manager arrived on the scene." It was also very strange, he added, that the very item which would have

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<sup>57</sup> Aberdare Leader, 18.3.39.

created a spark - the electrician's apparatus for testing currents - was never spotted by management or officials at any time before the explosion.

Answering Mr. Justice Lewis, Griffith Williams agreed that he was suggesting, in fact, that the management, knowing that an illegal practice was going on in the mine, either took away or got somebody to take away that vital piece of evidence.

Justice Lewis told the court that the Powell Duffryn officials were "not the sort of people who entirely, regardless of rules and regulations, would endanger the lives of workmen in that pit." He expressed himself as satisfied, despite the evidence of the case before him, that illegal methods, such as the fatal testing of electrical currents which had led to the explosion, were not common practice at Tirherbert colliery<sup>n</sup> or in any of the other P.D. collieries. Nevertheless, he gave judgement in favour of the widows and dependents on the grounds that, as he put it, "If half the evidence which had been given by the plaintiffs' witnesses were true the management of the mine were guilty and had been guilty for years of the most callous and criminal disregard of the lives of the men working in that pit."

Three of the widows received compensation sums of between £495 and £959; and the widow of Jones, the erring electrician, received nothing - on the grounds that it was her husband's use of illegal equipment which first ignited the explosion.<sup>58</sup>

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58 C.G., 29.3.40.



The second incident involving court proceedings can be told more simply. It occurred a few days after the Tirherbert explosion and involved three miners from Elliots Colliery in the Rhymney Valley. They were discovered by a Mines Inspector to be working in their headings with "insufficient timbering" to support the roof. They appeared, later in June, 1938, before magistrates at New Tredegar and were fined between ten shillings and one pound each.<sup>59</sup>

Neither of the two cases cited above were spectacular examples of miscarriages of justice. To find such a case, we have only to look at the Gresford explosion of 1934 which killed 265 men. The inquest into that disaster proved that breaches of the Coal Mines Act had occurred in relation to the keeping of colliery books and records, to the maintenance of adequate ventilation, to the supply of separate means of escape from the pit should the main shafts become disabled, to the cutting off of electric currents when more than  $1\frac{1}{4}\%$  of gas was present, and to the failure of the owners to comply with requirements regarding telephone apparatus, coal dust, withdrawal of workmen and limitation of hours. Yet not one Gresford company official amongst all those directly or indirectly involved, went to prison or was heavily fined.<sup>60</sup>

A charitable interpretation of the role of the courts in the fields of inquiry and litigation following mining accidents

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59 C.G., 22.7.38.

60 M. Hienemann, op.cit., p.79.

during the 1930s would be one which claimed that the judiciary were attempting to place the onus for safety onto individual workmen.

This was not the interpretation favoured by most mining families. There were many living in South Wales during the 1930s to whom the courts represented little more than institutionalised extensions of the Coalowners' economic power. Such people regarded the courts as being venues incomparably more congenial to the rich than to the poor. Indeed, there prevailed amongst the workforce during these years a feeling that Justice could be bought as easily as any other commodity by those who could afford it. One ex-miner expressed this feeling in the following way:

"The Law Courts of Britain", he said, "are open to all, like the doors of the Ritz Hotel." 61

What seems most to have galled working men and women was the apparent readiness of the courts, and especially of the local magistrates' courts, to accept automatically the words of the coalowners as being the words of completely honourable men, when they, the employees of the coalowners, knew them to be men who were as capable as the next of base and dishonourable actions. The average miner, it was felt, was, in the eyes of most local

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61 Recording of J.M. Phillips by Hywel Francis;  
Recordings Transcripts, South Wales Miners' Library,  
Swansea.

magistrates, guilty until proven innocent. The three prosecuted colliers of Elliots pit, for instance, would not have been held up by the mining workforce as the innocent victims of a biased judiciary. The prevailing sentiment would have been that the men were fined "for their own good". But the workforce also knew that one of the overriding causes of such transgressions of the law as that committed by the Elliots men was the system of work and payment which the coalowners operated in their pits. Low price lists, piecework, conveyor speed-ups and the competitive "stent" encouraged men to cut corners and to take risks.<sup>62</sup>

In the Gresford Enquiry, for instance, it was quite obvious that, in the final analysis, the cause of the disaster was, quite simply, the desire of the colliery owners and directors to maintain profits by increasing output and productivity. To do this, they allowed themselves the luxury of not bothering, as a great many other coalowners bothered, to slide around the safety regulations or to "interpret them loosely". At Gresford they simply disregarded them whenever it was deemed more profitable to do so. A Gresford under-manager, for instance, explaining to the Court of Enquiry why he had broken the regulations concerning shot-firing, said frankly: "If all these men on the level of

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62 The SWMF Investigators in 1937-38 reported that Elliots was amongst the worst organised of all Powell Duffryn Lodges, that price lists were exceedingly low and outdated and that management was dictatorial.

the main coal seam had to be withdrawn for every shot on that road, which I had considered quite safe personally, then the colliery would have to close. The Act could never be complied with."<sup>63</sup>

Such an admission would have shocked few miners in South Wales; for they, like their employers and managers, accepted that the taking of risks and constant occurrence of serious accidents underground were part of the "inevitable" price to be paid for coal. As Federation members, miners fought collectively, and sometimes fought hard, to lessen that price, but few questioned the fundamental supposition - that the business of coal-getting "naturally" entailed risk, injury and death. Generally speaking, it was only when management, acting on behalf of the owners, proceeded to violate certain ill-defined safety limits (which both they and the men would have recognised - usually through custom and practice) that sizeable disputes occurred. Even then, the disputes which did occur tended often to reflect this pervading acceptance of risk and death, for they often involved accusations of cowardice or malingering being levelled at individual workers, or groups of workers, by management.

Wherever a job or task involves risk-taking and the possibility of violent death, codes of behaviour emerge which will contain passages dealing with bravery, cowardice, manliness, skill, toughness and strength. Coalmining abounded with such

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63 M. Heinemann, op.cit. p. 79.

codes. They were understood, interpreted and re-applied by management, often in a perceptive and highly successful fashion, to maintain or increase the productivity of pitmen. The example which follows occurred at Bwllfa No. 1 colliery in 1938:

Tommy Howells recalls that he and his father "were opening the Seven Feet in the Old pit, Bwllfa, and we could only work there for about 20 minutes and then we had to come back to the pit-bottom for fresh air because it was full of foul, see. Driving towards Powell's Pit we was. And there was a feller Thomas, Undermanager there, from Cwmdare. We were only working in football shorts and old shoes, that's all - terrible place.

Thomas accused my father ... I was only a young man then ... accused us of malingering: saying that we were always back here (i.e. at pit bottom). Well, all we had for ventilation was an old feller with like a hand fan ... he was turning this bloody handle-crank, supposed to be giving us air ... And this Undermanager accused us, so my father leapt for him, caught him by the throat - his tongue came out about half a yard ... and I was trying to stop my father. "I'll bloody choke him", he said, because he was a wild bugger see.

Anyway, after a bit the Undermanager said "Put your clothes on and go back to the pit-bottom, you're all sacked..."

Back to the pit bottom. The banksman said he couldn't let us go up without the manager's permission. With that, three knocks came ... that meant men coming down. Down comes the Agent, Gwillym Rees, Cwmdare.

"What's the matter here William?" he asked my father. My father told him exactly what had happened. And we'd come from Powell's Pit especially to do this job - my father had a good reputation as a worker, see.

"You are not going home" he said, "go back to your work." He more or less reinstated us, but from then on during that Seven Feet the Undermanager played hell with us. Like on measuring day, when he was measuring "dead" work - you know, any work bar filling coal. If he could crop you a penny, he'd crop you."<sup>64</sup>

The attitude of the collier "William" (his name was Will Howells) and of his team towards the job on which they were employed is indicative of the attitude adopted by the great majority of the miners towards questions of safety and managerial responsibility for safety. The conditions in the heading in which Will Howells and his team worked are described as "terrible": ventilation was extremely poor, and the heading was full of foul air. But far from refusing to work in such conditions, the team attempted to adapt to them, presumably in the most efficient way they knew how, since to "malingering" would have meant them earning very little above the minimum wage. (They were Development Workers and were paid piece-work wage-rates).

The anger which was raised when the Undermanager accused them of malingering was anger of a special sort. It was not anger provoked directly by the bad conditions in the heading. It was anger which becomes comprehensible to the outsider only when he

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64 Recorded in Trecynon, April 1975.

understands the full implications of the term "malingering" as Will Howells would have understood them.

To be accused of malingering was to be accused of being a "deadleg", of not pulling your weight as a member of a mining team should, of choosing the soft option, of being afraid of "hard graft". The Undermanager's accusation was, in essence, a challenge to Will Howells's reputation as a "good worker".

The Undermanager would undoubtedly have been aware that the heading was full of "foul", and he would have known of Howell's reputation - the Company Agent was obviously aware of it. (The Undermanager seems also to have been aware of the collier's fiery temper, thus his attempt to "shame" the team back to work rather than straightforwardly bullying them back). When Will Howells lost his temper, he lost it because he felt that he and his team had been slighted for their efforts by a man who should have known better.

The attitudes expressed in this incident reflected the prevailing attitude of the workforce and their families towards the question of pit safety. For the most part, the workforce tolerated, even if they didn't welcome, the dangerous nature of their occupation. (In a time of severe economic depression like the 1930s they had little option but to tolerate it.) They became intolerant when it appeared to them that the coalowners were insulting their dignity, and the dignity of those maimed and widowed as a result of colliery accidents, by utilizing wealth and social standing to renege in Courts of Law

on the unwritten agreements between management and men concerning the "convenient" infringements of safety regulations by both sides at individual collieries.

Like the Undermanager at Bwllfa No. 1, the owners wanted to have their cake and to eat it. Not only did they demand, under threat of dismissal, that men worked in conditions which very often contravened the legal safety requirements, but they also demanded that, in the event of a serious accident, their employees should shoulder the blame for any contraventions which became evident during subsequent court proceedings.

It was not a cut and dried situation. Far from it. The dangers at work created in the Valleys a vital sense of community and comradeship. But, though the miners accepted risk and danger, they demanded, in return, recognition of that acceptance by the owners and by the courts. They demanded, in effect, that both the owners and the courts should recognise that, in the effort to produce coal profitably, safety regulations were very often sidestepped or ignored by both men and management.

When a mineowner denied responsibility for the death or disablement of an employee, he generally attempted to prove his case in court by shifting the blame for the accident onto the victim. This practice was "morally" acceptable to the workforce only when it became obvious, during the course of accident inquests, that the victims had suffered as a direct result of their own foolishness - perhaps by lighting cigarettes underground or wandering up closed and gas-filled roadways. In cases other than these exceptional ones, however, the legal efforts of the coalowners were viewed with great suspicion and scepticism.



For, not only was it generally believed by the coalfield's workforce that the owners could buy their way out of trouble by hiring sharp lawyers, but it was also believed that the judiciary were, as often as not, in the pockets of the coalowners. The controversy over the Tirherbert explosion of 1938 is a case in point.

The first attempt to prosecute the Powell Duffryn Company by the four widows of the Tirherbert victims took place, it will be remembered, at the Aberdare Police Court in March 1939. The attempt failed when the Bench ruled that there was insufficient evidence against the Company's named defendants: D.R. Llewellyn and Son, Ltd., (a subsidiary of Powell Duffryn; Sir D.R. Llewellyn and Mr. W.M. Llewellyn, J.P., were on the Board of Directors of Powell Duffryn) J.A. Price, the Company Agent, and Isaac L. Davies, the Manager of Tirherbert.

In the light of the subsequent award made to the widows, against the Company, at the Cardiff Assizes, this judgement by the Aberdare Magistrates was quite remarkable - more so when it is taken into account that they dismissed, out of hand, charges brought against the Company alleging that no safety lamps had been provided, as they should have been by law, on the coal cutting machine at the face where the men died, (a charge which the Company did not bother to deny at the Cardiff Assizes) and that the dead electrician had been allowed, by management, to use, for many years, an illegal apparatus for the testing of electrical currents.

The ex-mineworkers and their families whom I interviewed in Aberdare seem never to have been particularly puzzled by such a judicial inconsistency. They explained them by referring to the "link-up" which they say existed between the local courts and the owners.

This "link-up", it is argued, worked invariably in favour of the employers, whether the cases before the courts concerned accident compensation <sup>r</sup> or charges of evasion of employment. In the Tirherbert explosion case, this explanation seems extremely sound.

The magistrates present at the Aberdare hearing of the case were Mr. J. Bowen-Davies, K.C., Stipendiary of the old Miskin Higher Hundred, Mr. E.J. Lewis of Hirwaun, and Mr. J. Prowle.

Jack Prowle was, at the time of the Hearing, a Labour County Councillor. He had been, until 1926, a political and trade-union "militant". By 1929, however, he appears to have shifted his allegiance from the left to the extreme right of the Labour Party. The reasons for this shift have a direct bearing on his handling of the Tirherbert case.

In the words of a long-time observer of the Aberdare political scene, Prowle had become, during the three years following the great lock-out, "... hopelessly enmeshed with the Llewellyns of Bwllfa and with the Banks family of Aberdare."<sup>65</sup> (The Llewellyns were the prominent coalowners and principal defendants in the Tirherbert case. The Banks were a well-to-do family of doctors

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65 Recording of Edwin Greening, Abercwmboi, April 1975.

and surgeons, related by marriage to the powerful Hann family, controllers, with the Llewellyns, of Powell Duffryn. In addition, Banks sat on the Aberdare Hospital Committee alongside W.M. Llewellyn). Prowle was alleged to have been, throughout the 1930s, a regular guest of the Llewellyn family at their musical and gastronomic soirees.<sup>66</sup>

He did not, however, appear to have shared the Llewellyns' great enthusiasm for fox hunting and equestrian sports in general as did his companion on the Bench, Mr. E.J. Lewis.

Just four months before the case was heard, the "Aberdare Leader" carried a report of the proceedings of the opening meet of the Bwllfa Hunt. Welcoming the cream of Glamorgan Society, as well as guests from other parts of Great Britain, was the Master of the Hunt, Alderman W.M. Llewellyn, J.P., Director of Powell Duffryn. Amongst his distinguished guests was listed the Lewis family of Hirwaun, and chief amongst that family was Mr. E.J. Lewis, proprietor of the Aberdare Steam Laundry and member of the Aberdare Police Court Bench. The journalist covering the fox hunt reported a colourful turnout, and pinpointed the first kill of the season as having occurred at Gelliafolws Farm, barely two miles due north of Tirherbert Colliery.<sup>67</sup>

Two months later, in January 1939, the same paper carried a page three headline which ran, "Storm Over Stipendiary's 'Lay-a-beds' Comment". It reported that a resolution of protest to the Home

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>67</sup> Aberdare Leader, 19.11.38.

Secretary, a public petition, a mass meeting of the unemployed, a boycott of the Police Court Bench by Labour Magistrates, had been amongst the measures suggested at an angry meeting of the Aberdare Trades and Labour Council on Thursday, January 6th, as a protest against what the paper referred to as "... the remark recently made by Stipendiary J. Bowen Davies, K.C., about 'lazy lie-abeds' which has already provoked a motion of criticism in the House of Commons by Labour M.P.s."<sup>68</sup>

The Council meeting was marked by "very outspoken discussion", during which several delegates, including Labour councillors, expressed their "disgust at the reflection cast on the unemployed", (who happened to be the targets for Bowen-Davies's verbal castigation) and in which Aberdare's M.P., George Hall, described the remark as "contemptible and unworthy".<sup>69</sup>

The Chairman of the Trades and Labour Council, Councillor Tom Meredith, himself an unemployed miner, commented that "a man sprung from the legal profession (Bowen-Davies was a qualified barrister) should be the last person in the world to talk about lie-abeds ... These people never go to work until ten o'clock in the morning ... Many of the unemployed, when they were working, had to get up a five in the morning." To cries of "Hear, hear." Coun. Meredith added, "I am one of the thousands who wish they had the privilege of getting out of bed earlier to go to work." He went on the express surprise that a man who enjoyed such a

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68 Ibid., 14.1.39.

69 Ibid.

high standard of life at the people's expense should talk in such a manner and insult people who did not have sufficient food, clothing and warmth.<sup>70</sup>

The Aberdare Council Chamber, too, witnessed angry expressions of protest at Bowen-Davies's comments. Coun. William Lawrence, "... speaking as an individual and a layman", said that Aberdare was "... seething with inarticulate resentment and was uncomfortable with Mr. Bowen-Davies, K.C., on the Bench." Coun. Lawrence continued, "If that was the only remark (Bowen-Davies) had made during his term of office, then his shortcomings would be small, but this is the culmination of a host of others."<sup>71</sup>

Lawrence admitted that it would have been difficult for him to "prove any concrete case" against Bowen-Davies's activities as a Stipendiary, but he emphasised that what he wanted to describe and to stress, above all, was the "atmosphere" created by Bowen-Davies's judgements. "The citizens of Aberdare", continued Lawrence, "felt very uncomfortable as far as the administration of justice in the town was concerned. The most respectable citizens felt it ... When such a state of affairs existed something must be radically wrong."<sup>72</sup>

Lawrence quoted a remark which, he alleged, Bowen-Davies had made during a courtcase: "It is inconceivable that a police officer should tell an untruth."

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70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

"Saying this", continued Lawrence, "gave the implication that the civilian, whoever he might be, was saying an untruth... There is an inarticulate feeling in Aberdare today that is difficult to express. The best thing that could happen to Aberdare is the removal of the Stipendiary."<sup>73</sup>

Coun. Sam Wilcox, supporting Lawrence, commented that he thought that Bowen-Davies aimed to "... wipe the floor with the working class", and that he was "going too far" and should therefore be removed from office.

The Aberdare Council unanimously carried a resolution highly critical of Bowen-Davies's comments. He was not, however, removed from office.

The Stipendiary's contempt for the long-term unemployed was, of course, only an echo of earlier allegations made by coalowners like W.B. Davies who, as we have seen above (p.116), attempted to "play-down" the distress caused by continuing high levels of unemployment by inferring that there were plenty of jobs available ... for those with enough "spirit" to get out and find them. It is hardly stretching speculation too far to suggest that Bowen Davies, and others in similar positions like him, were probably instrumental in popularizing this myth amongst the petit bourgeois elements of the Valleys' communities. They saw themselves as the hard-headed representatives of those in the National Government who had "struggled" in the face of widespread "socialist hostility" for

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73 Ibid.

the previous eight years in the interests of British industrialists and financiers to cut back on public expenditure, and especially on the payment of unemployment benefit. Like the editors of the coalowners' mouthpiece, the "Colliery Guardian", they wanted to "... destroy the pernicious fallacy that has been built up in the years of industrial stress, that the resources of the state may be usefully employed in keeping workmen off the labour market ..."<sup>74</sup>

These, then, were the three magistrates whom the state had entrusted with the task of judging, in a disinterested fashion, the Tirherbert widows' claim against the Llewellyns of Powell Duffryn. Two were personal friends of the Llewellyn family, and the third was a Stipendiary who, because of his inflexible support for the status quo, was denied even the confidence of the "most respectable citizens" of Aberdare.

This "link-up" between the courts and the owners had its counterpart in the medical profession, too. Arthur Horner, for instance, related in his autobiography how the personal connections between doctors and coalowners in the Mardy jeopardised the chances of silicosis sufferers receiving compensation for their disease: "... some of the doctors were in close contact with the coalowners because it was the coalowners who paid them. Before a man could be certified (i.e. certified as suffering from silicosis) he had to produce a form provided by the regional medical officer. We soon found that the news that the men were applying for these forms was passed on to the owners.

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<sup>74</sup> C.G., 11.1.35.

"Under the law at that time, compensation was only payable to a man if he was totally disabled. Thus, when a man asked for a form and the information got back to the employers, he was liable to be sacked, because if he could not substantiate his claim for 100 per cent disability the owners would get rid of him so that they would not have to face a claim for compensation later on. There were heartbreaking cases of men who went on working when their lives could have been saved because if they had the disease treated they were facing the possibility of dismissal from their jobs."<sup>76</sup>

In Aberdare, the links between certain General Practitioners and the Powell Duffryn Company were very obvious. An incident involving the Company's compensation clerk, J.P. Phillips, illustrates one link very well. It was described during a discussion upon the subject by ex-Powell Duffryn miners at the Trecynon Welfare Hall in March 1974. Idris Jones, one of the participants, outlined the procedure which had to be followed if an injured miner hoped to receive compensation or unemployment benefit whilst off work.

Such a man would first have to visit one of the "compo centres" where Phillips and a G.P. would attend to him. Though payment depended upon medical examination and opinion, it would seem that it was often Phillips, and not the doctors, who would make the examination and decisions as to the "quality" of the

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<sup>76</sup> A. Horner, op.cit., pp.141-142.



miner's injuries. Idris Jones emphasised that Phillips " ... was a clerk, not a doctor; but even though your own doctor had examined and dressed your injury and told you not to remove the bandages until further notice, you'd go down the compensation office to see Phillips, and he'd order you to take off the dressing - he'd take it off himself if he felt like it - so that he could look at the wound."<sup>77</sup>

Whilst this layman's examination continued, the doctor in attendance would, according to Idris Jones, "say bugger all". The doctors most often in attendance at Powell Duffryn examinations were Drs. Fox and McClure, neither of whom were held in very high esteem by the participants of the Trecynon meeting: "Swines they were too," insisted one contributor, Brew Davies, "you'd have to have your head half off before they'd let you off work with some compensation payments."<sup>78</sup>

The "link" between the doctors and the owners was even cemented in marriage, mainly through the union of male medical practitioners of the prominent Banks family of Aberdare to female members of the Hann and Cory coal<sup>o</sup>wing families. . Indeed, so delighted was Trevor Banks with his marriage to one of the Cory's that he gallantly dropped his own surname and adopted, instead, the title of the world-famous coal exporters to whom he automatically had become related. Henceforth, he was known

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<sup>77</sup> Recorded in Trecynon, March 1974.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

to patients and friends alike as Trevor Cory.<sup>79</sup>

In addition, Harry Banks, the husband of a daughter of the Hann family, sat alongside W.M. Llewellyn on both the Magistrate's Bench (where they were J.P.s) and the Aberdare Hospital Committee. (Where, as one G.P. who generally opposed them at Committee Meetings observed, they represented "reaction").<sup>80</sup>

The fracture of the community along class lines was nowhere more evident than over this question of payment of compensation for pit injuries and disease. The examples put forward by men who worked for Powell Duffryn alleging the open collusion of doctors and owners to deprive injured persons of their rightful compensation are extraordinarily numerous.<sup>81</sup> Many examples will, of course, have been exaggerated, some, perhaps, even invented, but the bitterness and clarity with which these events are recalled forty years after they occurred is itself indicative of the scale of the injustices felt to have been done to the workforce at the time. Idris Jones, for instance, expressed very clearly the general feeling of the Trecynon discussion: "The P.D. big-shots, the doctors, the town's big tradespeople, and others like them were all in organisations like the Round Table, or the Rotary Club, or the Board of the Amateur Football Club - anything that might be profitable, they would have a share in it ... the working man had no part of that at all."<sup>82</sup>

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79 Recording of Dr. Alistair Wilson, G.P., October 1976, Aberdare.

80 Ibid.

81 Various recordings 1974-1978.

82 Recorded in Trecynon, March 1974.

The collaboration of the doctors with the Company occurred, it seems, even in the most serious cases, including many which involved a deliberation on the doctor's part on the actual causes of death in cases where miners had died some months, or even years, after they had sustained serious injuries in pit accidents. One ex-Powell Duffryn miner, Lew Howells, for example, cited the case of his father who, in 1935, suffered the loss of his right arm as a result of an accident involving an unguarded cable-drum.

At the very time that this man was being transported from the pit to hospital, a guard was being constructed around the drum - without the knowledge of the Howells family.<sup>83</sup> Within hours of the accident, as soon as a brief hospital report was available, it was decided by J.P. Phillips that the injured man be awarded £1.7/- per week compensation. This information he conveyed personally to Howells's wife who, in a state of shock upon hearing the news of her husband's accident, agreed to the Company's terms. She and her husband would receive the £1.7/- per week as long as the husband remained out of employment.

He died approximately one year later from causes which the doctor who attended him - Harry Banks M.D. - described as "resulting from an attack of anaemia".<sup>84</sup> He would not concede that the man, previously described as a "robust and hard-working collier", had been seriously affected in respect of his general health by his accident. The doctor maintained that the loss of the right arm had contributed nothing to the cause of his death.

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83 Recording of Lew Howells, June 1975, Aberdare.

84 Ibid.

The £1.7/- per week payment to Lew Howells's mother was immediately stopped: notice of stoppage being given within five hours of her husband's death.<sup>85</sup>

It was the way in which Powell Duffryn officials, and J.P. Phillips in particular, managed to carry the Company's interests into homes which had suffered losses of menfolk, sometimes, as in the case of Lew Howells's parents, only a few hours earlier, which appears to have stuck most in the throats of ex-Powell Duffryn miners.

"Phillips would arrive at the widow's house within hours of her husband's death.", said ex-miner Hector Garrett, "He would place a sum of money on the table: perhaps £100, or £150 or even £200, and in her desperate state the dead man's wife would accept. She didn't know any better. It was money on the table, probably more money in one place than she'd ever seen in her lifetime. But if she'd hung on ... if someone had been there to help and advise her, she'd have got much more out of them. P.D.'s depended upon officials like Phillips to take advantage of those situations and settle immediately, it saved them one hell of a lot of money."<sup>86</sup>

The coal companies were, indeed, extremely eager to "settle immediately". For compensation payments were, by the late 'Thirties, imposing ever-increasing burdens on the companies' payrolls. In July 1939, for instance, the Chairman of the Amalgamated Anthracite

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85 Ibid.,

86 Recorded in Trecynon, March 1974.

Company, F.A. Szarvasy, complained to the company's shareholders at their annual meeting that during 1938 the Company's controllers had suffered from too much legislation, too many Acts and too many orders: "In the last 10 years there had been altogether no less than 68 different Acts and Orders affecting (their) industry. Of these, seven dealt with workmen's compensation, and in practically every instance brought more diseases - and therefore more expenditure - within the scope of that Act. Safety in mines and general mining regulations accounted for a further 39 Acts, and each of these as a rule was accompanied by some item calculated to increase cost of production."<sup>87</sup>

Szarvasy was quite specific about the costs of compensation: payments had risen from £257,566 in 1929, to £420,761 in 1938.<sup>88</sup> He rued the fact that, because they were obliged by law to pay compensation where a case against the Company was proven, management could do nothing to prevent this outflow of "actual cash" and automatic "reduction in profits".<sup>89</sup> He went on to state that, since the Company was "stuck" with its obligations to pay out such money, then they, as Directors and Managers, had little choice but to come to terms with the causes of compensatable injuries and diseases. In particular, he informed his audience, they had to come to terms with the "fatal disease called silicosis", which, he said, "was giving cause for grave concern" as there had been

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87 C.G., 7.7.39.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid.

no sign in recent years of a falling off in the number of cases certified: "... on the contrary there (were) indications that the incidence would become disturbingly heavy".<sup>90</sup>

The threat to health from dust disease came sharply into focus in the 1930s. Horner, as we have read, claimed that it "spurred" him on in his fight to bring about nationalisation of the mines. It undoubtedly had the same effect on a great many other miners and their families, for the appalling statistics concerning dust diseases were the kind which were impossible to file away and forget. The evidence shuffled around the streets and parks, coughing and dying. Dust disease was the most persistent and intrusive of class lessons; it forced its way even into the homes of colliery officials:

"We carried out subterfuge", wrote Horner, "and I'm not ashamed to say I took part in it. Lodge Committees would carry down pieces of the rocks named in the Order (i.e. rocks containing silica - the mineral which was believed to be the prime cause of the disease) and scatter them anywhere in the mines where we knew that men suffering from lung disease had been working. Some of the collieries' officials knew this was being done and they took no action to stop it because they were equally in danger from the disease."<sup>91</sup>

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90 Ibid.

91 A. Horner, op.cit., p.142.

Pneumoconiosis : the Statistics

The disease of pneumoconiosis received its first systematic coalfield investigation in 1936, when the Industrial Pulmonary Diseases Committee of the Medical Research Council began an examination of coalminers, a class of men who were known to be particularly liable to it. They came to the conclusion that the disease could be caused by the inhalation of coal-dust as well as by rock-dust, whereas it had previously been widely assumed that silicosis, or, as it is now generally described, "pneumoconiosis", could only be contracted by the inhalation of dust arising from seams of rock adjacent to or crossing the coal seams: coal dust itself had been thought to be harmless.<sup>92</sup>

The Hugh-Jones and Fletcher work of 1951 included silicosis within the term "pneumoconiosis" and divided the latter disease into two categories of illness. The first, now called "simple pneumoconiosis", is probably due solely to the effect of dust inhalation. It is not in itself often seriously disabling and does not progress in the absence of dust inhalation, but when sufficiently advanced it may at any time become complicated by the second process, whether exposure to dust continues or not. This second process is called "progressive massive fibrosis", and only seems to arise in cases already affected by simple pneumoconiosis. "Complicated pneumoconiosis", as Jones and

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92 "The Social Consequences of Pneumoconiosis among Coalminers in South Wales." P. Hugh-Jones and C.M. Fletcher, HMSO 1951; Medical Research Council Memorandum No. 25.

Fletcher termed it, is the combination of simple dust disease and massive fibrosis, and is nearly always progressive, even if independent of continued dust exposure. Sooner or later it causes severe disability and may lead to early death.

Until 1928, miners suffering from pneumoconiosis were forced by economic necessity, as well as by ignorance of the disease, to work either until they died or until they were no longer able to stagger to the pit-top. Under a scheme of the 1925 Workmen's Compensation Act, silicosis was, in 1928, recognised as a compensatable disease, but no coalminers applied for compensation under this scheme until 1931, mainly because the criteria for certification were so stringent.<sup>93</sup>

Miners who became totally disabled and were known to have been working in silica rock - a very small number - could then apply to the Silicosis Medical Board for compensation. If they were certified as bona fide sufferers they received either a lump sum or else a weekly pension: neither of which could be termed as being in any way "generous". They were also suspended from work permanently, presumably as a protection against themselves - against the temptation to earn a few shillings more for the remainder of a diseased life.

In 1931 the scheme was extended to include partially disabled as well as totally disabled men, and in 1934 to any miner who had positive signs of silicosis on ~~X~~<sup>✓</sup>-ray, whether or not he had been working in rock. From 1943 onwards it included all coal miners

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93 Ibid., p.2.



who showed radiological evidence of being at a certain, agreed and advanced, stage of pneumoconiosis. This increased the numbers eligible for compensation enormously, and also, of course, the numbers of those suspended from mining.<sup>94</sup>

By the time the Jones and Fletcher report appeared in 1951, the vast majority of cases of coalminers' pneumoconiosis recorded had been recorded in South Wales, where, as they pointed out,<sup>95</sup> there was little alternative employment to coalmining for the certified men. Those who could find no alternative employment, and very few could, were thus made unemployed in an already distressed area. This had, amongst some of those men that I have interviewed, the effect of making them very wary indeed of reporting dust symptoms to the Medical Boards:

"Well what could you do see ... you looked at these poor buggers all around you, some of them only just alive, and of course it would make you scared - make anybody afraid- but then, what alternative did you have? Only to go on working and keep your mouth shut, (laughter and coughing) out of the worst dust if you could possibly swing it, but in the dust otherwise. What could you do if you went to the Medical people? If you had a family you couldn't live without a ... oh ... a bloody terrible struggle on the money you got off them." 96

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94 In July 1948 the National Insurance (Industrial Injuries) Act (1946) came into force. Under its provisions certain men who had pneumoconiosis were permitted, if they wished, to continue working in the mines under "approved" dust conditions and under medical supervision, thus enabling them to receive some disability benefit without compulsory suspension.

95 Jones and Fletcher, p.2. .

96 Recording of Lew Howells, June 1975, in Aberdare.

Figure 2 (page 168) illustrates the incidence of pneumoconiosis for the years 1939 to 1957 in five single, or combined, Divisions throughout Britain. The great leaps which occurred in the South Wales figures in the mid-1940s were the results of the extended powers of disease-classification introduced as a result of the 1943 legislation already mentioned. The legislation was applied nationally. Figure 2 charts out the number of new cases discovered annually,<sup>97</sup> but the totals, whilst being far from arbitrary, nevertheless tended to reflect the incidence of disease accurately only if the screening processes employed at coalfield level by the medical authorities were efficient enough to discover the overwhelming majority of cases. There were, in addition, large numbers of men who left the industry (either voluntarily or because they were made redundant during the slump) before they were aware that they had contracted the disease. Of those men who were actually certified, however, between 1931 and 1948, nearly 90 per cent of them were certified in South Wales. After the legislation of 1943 the panels of the Medical Board became overwhelmed and a large waiting list was built up. More doctors were appointed to the panels in 1944 and certification reached a peak in 1945, in which year over 5,000 men were certified.<sup>98</sup>

As Jones and Fletcher point out, 22,000 men were certified with pneumoconiosis in Great Britain between 1931 and 1948, and

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97 Figures obtained from H.M. Inspectors of Mines Reports, 1939-1957.

98 Ibid.

of these 19,000 were in South Wales - an excessive concentration made all the more significant by the fact that only one-sixth of all coalminers in Great Britain worked in this coalfield during the period.

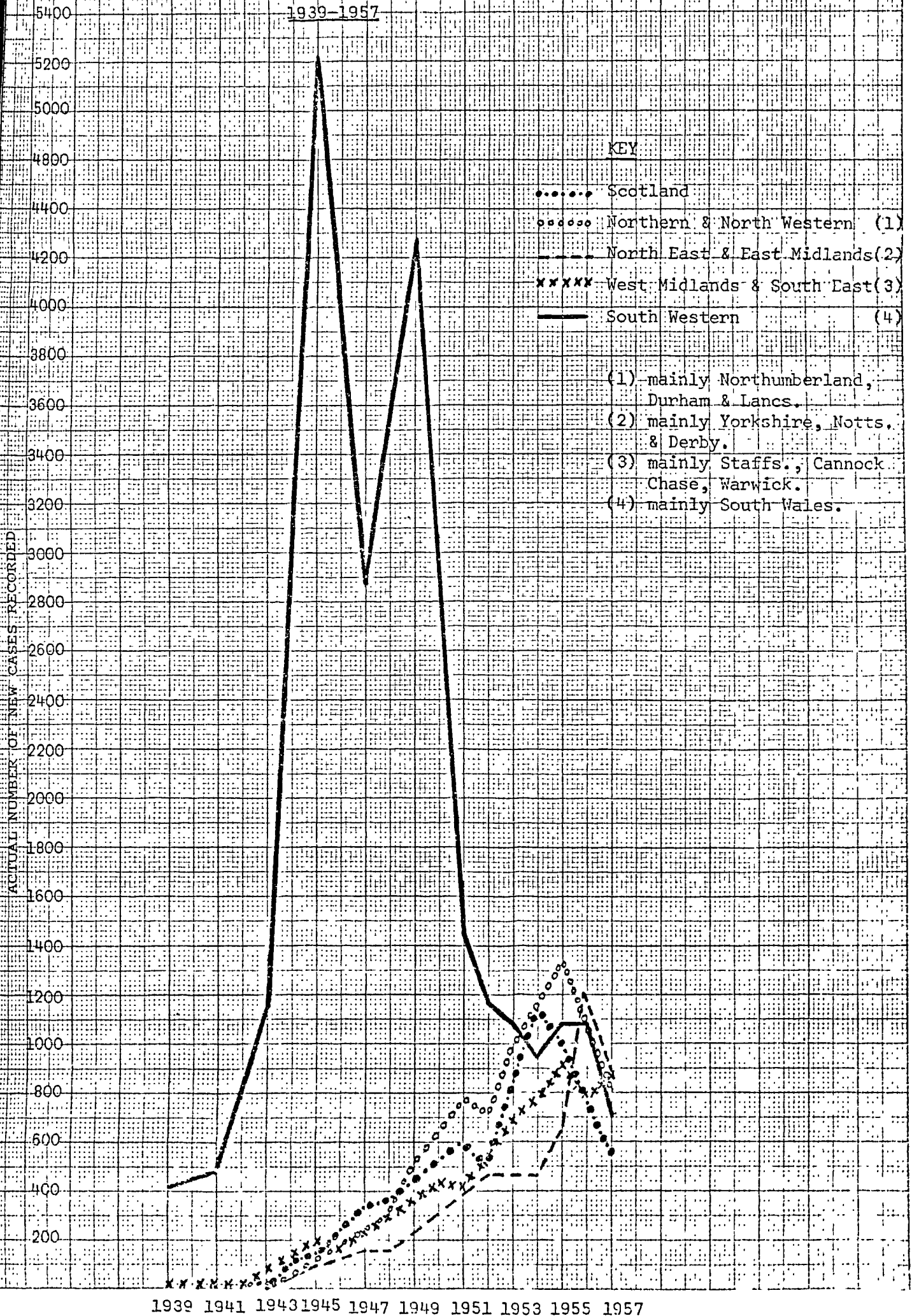
Within the South Wales coalfield itself, however, it is difficult to name the areas of greatest concentration of the disease. Employment Exchanges list actual number of unemployed men with pneumoconiosis who are seeking work at any given time: the figures for the following Employment Exchanges were recorded in November, 1948:

Exchange and coal-type area.	Number of unemployed men who were registered under the Disabled Persons (Employment) Act as being disabled with pneumoconiosis.
Tonypandy (steam coal area)	413
Tumble (anthracite " )	312
Ystalyfera( " " )	299
Garnant ( " " )	295
Ammanford ( " " )	279
Mountain Ash(steam " )	243
Ferndale (steam coal " )	234
Aberdare ( " " )	218
Porth ( " " )	191
Pontypridd( " " )	181
Treorchy ( " " )	148

The figures above depend, in any measurement of their severity within a community, upon the size of that community, the alternative employment, and upon the degree to which men were willing to submit themselves for certification. There may well have been a direct correlation between the incidence of missed cases and the levels of unemployment existing within each community. If this was the

FIGURE 2 : NEW CASES OF PNEUMOCONIOSIS AND SILICOSIS AT  
COAL-MINES BY DIVISION AND JOINT-DIVISION

1939-1957



case, then it is highly likely that diseased miners in towns like Tonypany or Ystalyfera would have chosen to "hang on" and to keep quiet rather than accept the certainty that they, too, would end up idle.

The very high incidence of the disease in the anthracite field had long been known and there seems to have been a general rule that the further west one travelled across the South Wales coalfield, the higher the incidence of dust disease. However, the very large numbers of sufferers in the archetypal mono-industrial valleys of Rhondda and Aberdare almost certainly indicate the presence of large caches of undiscovered pneumoconiosis victims. The 1951 Report of Jones and Fletcher estimated that there were about 16,000 certified sufferers and a larger number of uncertified sufferers alive in South Wales in that year.

In 1939, there were 128,000 wage-earners on the colliery books of South Wales. In 1947 this figure had fallen to 108,200 - a deficit which might nearly have been met by the 16,000 workers certified between 1940 and 1947.<sup>99</sup> In 1951, it was estimated that no less than eleven per cent of the male working population of South Wales were disabled.<sup>100</sup>

Compensation payments for these large numbers of men and their families did not improve to any considerable degree until well into the Second World War, and prior to that date, many of them did not receive the prescribed full rate of 30/- per week

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<sup>99</sup> Jones & Fletcher, op.cit., p.6.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p.9.

for total disability. Compensation was based on half the average wages and as wages were previously low and because there had been a severe loss of time-worked due to the trade depression, men frequently found themselves having to be content with sums well below 30/-. At the Royal Commission in 1939, it was estimated that the average rate on the coalfield was 25/-.

In his Presidential Address to the SWMF Annual Conference in 1944, Horner referred to the terms of payment as compensation for miners' widows: "Recent legislation", he informed his audience, "has provided an increase from £300 to £400 for widows. We are not content, we never will be, until compensation is equal to wages. Weekly compensation is the wage of a disabled man. Why should it be less than if he remained able to proceed to his work? Again, the dependants' compensation should be in lieu of wages, and there can be no justification for widows and orphans having to exist on incomes far below that which they previously received."<sup>101</sup>

He declared that he had always considered the struggle for compensation to be "equally important with wages" and he was not exaggerating. The controversies aroused by the non-payment of compensation served not only to highlight moral and ethical considerations regarding the cost of life and limb; they also strengthened the miners' healthy sense of collective paranoia - their sense of being the victims of a conspiracy hatched by coalowners and sycophantic functionaries and blessed by the state's courts and government.

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<sup>101</sup> Annual Conference Address 1944, p.12. SWMF Files, U.C.S.

## Chapter 5

Errata: pp.176 & 177 have been ommitted.

## Chapter Five

### The United Front : a political response and a continuity

Though unemployment figures remained outrageously high throughout 1936, the year brought with it widespread hope that something positive might emerge from the economic crisis. During 1935, the streets of South Wales had witnessed a number of huge demonstrations directed against the domestic policies of the National Government. Those demonstrating had included groups and individuals from as wide a range of political and religious persuasions as was possible on the coalfield and Arthur Horner recalled later how optimistic he had become at the prospect of what he interpreted as the "increasing unity of the working class"<sup>1</sup> and he described how he and his fellow Communists had attempted to extend this unity so that it might include the promotion of a formal political alliance between his Party and Labour. By May 1936, for example, they had persuaded the SWMF annual conference to submit a motion to the annual conference of the MFGB calling for the huge block vote of the miners to be cast at the Labour Party conference in favour of accepting the affiliation of the Communist Party. The General Secretary of the SWMF, Oliver Harris, drafted the following message for the MFGB delegates:

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1 Arthur Horner, op.cit., p.157.



"The Communists and the Labour Party Leaders have said a lot of harsh things about each other. There is no quarrel more bitter than a quarrel among brothers. But we hope that both parties now see the folly of attacking each other for the last few years to the delight and profit of their common enemy." 2

The SWMF's motion was rejected. "We did not succeed in our objective," wrote Horner, "but that period proved to me that it was natural for the working class to be united, than to be divided as we had been for so many years."<sup>3</sup>

Henry Pelling has pointed out that it was "only in South Wales that the (Communist) Party was able to get a real foothold in the unions."<sup>4</sup> The reasons for this are linked inextricably with the failure of successive governments, Tory and Labour alike, to take decisive action to alleviate economic and social distress in the mining communities. The electors of South Wales found themselves, after 1931, faced with a social democratic impasse. Their parliamentary representatives, for all of their eloquence, were unable to overcome the complacency of the majority within the House of Commons. The National Government appeared to prefer to ignore the problems of the distressed areas. Examples of the frustration which this engendered amongst Welsh MPs abound. In his biography of Aneurin Bevan, for instance, Michael Foot contrasts the avid

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2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Henry Pelling, "The British Communist Party", London 1958 p.84.

interest aroused in the Commons and Press by the introduction, in April 1937, of an Excess Profits Tax with the apathy which both bodies displayed towards the introduction of a Special Areas Bill during the same session:

"Bevan was maddened by the contrast between the lively, packed benches which discussed the complaints of the financiers and the swift relapse into weariness when yet another Special Areas Amendment Bill had to pass through all its stages ..." 5

When Bevan, during the Special Areas Amendment debate in question, attempted to slash through the procedural fug and impart some urgency into the discussion, he was suspended from the House. In the columns of the Daily Express he informed the country of the reasons for his frustration and concern:

"He told once again the story the country would not hear, the story of South Wales and the other distressed areas where 'men and women are rotting to death in the midst of industrial graveyards.' No one cared to heal the wounds of these victims of economic lunacy; instead acid was poured into them." 6

The population of the Valleys was being drained of its most vital elements as young men and women left for the Midlands and South East England in search of work. The loss is recorded in Table One on page 174.

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5 Michael Foot, "Aneurin Bevan", London 1962. Vol. One, p. 255.

6 Ibid., p. 256.

Table One : Showing the loss through migration in the estimated numbers of the population in the South Wales Industrial Area 1931-1935.<sup>7</sup>

	April 1931	June 1933	June 1933	June 1935	April 1931	June 1935
INDUSTRIAL COUNTIES	Total Numbers Lost	Percentage of Local Population Lost	Total Numbers Lost	Percentage of Local Population Lost	Total Numbers Lost	Percentage of Local Population Lost
Glamorganshire	20,931	1.71	26,903	2.19	47,834	3.90
Brecknockshire (part)	197	.82	51	.21	248	1.03
Carmarthenshire ..	679	.63	1,358	1.29	2,037	1.92
Monmouthshire ..	10,191	2.49	11,451	2.79	21,642	5.28
Total Industrial Area	31,998	1.77	39,763	2.20	71,761	3.97

In Chapters One and Two it ~~is~~<sup>was</sup> argued that another of the consequences of mass unemployment was a widespread and marked erosion of trade-union and "formal"-political muscle amongst the ranks of the coalfield's workforce and that alternative forms and targets of political activity filled some of the resulting vacuum - the most obvious examples being the campaign to eradicate Company unionism and the organisation of huge street demonstrations against the Means Test and in support of the anti-Fascists in Spain.

The popular concern for the fate of the young Spanish republic, though pushed continuously as an issue by the CPGB for propaganda purposes, nevertheless reflected the link which had been made in the demonstrators' minds between their own plight and that of the workers in the Spanish Republic. Both, it seemed, were being

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<sup>7</sup> "Second Industrial Survey of South Wales", Cardiff 1937, Vol. I, p.147, Table 2

crushed by the forces of reaction - despite the fact that both had elected their representatives in good social-democratic fashion.

Politically, the link engendered a sense of impatience and, sometimes, outright disenchantment with the Parliamentary Labour Party. The traditional, and unflinching, support of the Valleys' electorate for Labour was no longer to be reflected at local

(continued p.178)

elections. As Hywel Francis points out, the Communist Party, in many towns and villages, had "supplanted the Labour Party. By 1936, it had seventeen district and county councillors in the coalfields, including seven on the Rhondda Urban District Council. A Communist, Arthur Horner, was elected President of the S.W.M.F., although he had been expelled from the organisation up to 1933, while Communists were elected to its executive council. In 1935 there were 352 Communists in the SWMF, mostly in responsible positions, while in the Neath Area alone there were twelve pit cells and a mining group of 48 members."<sup>14</sup>

At general elections, however, CPGB members were instructed by their executive to give unqualified support to Labour Party candidates in all constituencies other than those in which the CPGB itself put forward a candidate. This meant that Communists were backing right-wing Labour candidates as well as those on the left of the Party. Despite this display of "solidarity", however, the CPGB found its overtures to the Labour Party falling mostly upon deaf ears; its application for affiliation to the larger party was rejected in 1936. Nevertheless, the foundations for the Communist Party's adoption of its "British" road to socialism had been laid and were beginning to set quite firmly. From 1935 onwards, the CPGB was to offer, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, its "critical support" to the Labour Party and to any efforts designed to maintain a Labour Government - be it of

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.180.

the Left or Right - in preference to a government of Tories.<sup>15</sup>

Professor Hobsbawm has explained how the formation of this "People's Front" was envisaged by the Comintern as a potentially "transitional form" of government on the road to socialism. Fascism, argued the Comintern, was the "logical expression of monopoly capitalism, which had reduced the effective control of the economy to a handful of ultra-powerful corporations or groups ... These crucial groups of concentrated capitalist power, in a period of revolution and intensifying class struggle, saw their main salvation in fascism at home and abroad."<sup>16</sup>

This image - of monopoly capitalism and fascism linked in a mutual embrace - was one used repeatedly in propaganda campaigns by Welsh members of the Communist Party. Few places in Britain had witnessed a class struggle more intense or clearly-drawn than that which continued in the pits of South Wales throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and nowhere had there appeared a clearer parallel between the intensity of the struggle and the growth of near-monopoly ownership of the means of production. The miners' "natural enemies", as Dimitrov would have referred to them, were the big coalowners and their relatives and allies at the head of the Press and Government.<sup>17</sup> These "enemies" had to be

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15 The main exception to this rule was the CPGB's enthusiasm for the election of a "progressive" government of National Unity in 1945.

16 Quoted in Eric Hobsbawm, "Forty Years of Popular Front Government", in "Marxism Today", July 1976, p.224.

17 There had, for many years, been a "traditional" association of some newspaper owners with mine ownership: "Thus the brothers Lords Camrose and Kemsley, of the Berry family, which helped to build up the Cambrian Combine in South Wales, between them (controlled), wholly or in part, some of the most important national and local newspapers, notably the Daily Telegraph, Daily Sketch, Sunday Graphic, Western Mail." Quoted in Margot Heinemann, op.cit. p.127.

effectively challenged - a task which, in Dimitrov's terms, the "isolated revolutionary vanguard" should not undertake alone. It needed the participation of the "broadest masses" who would, or so the Comintern's theory ran, recognise and utilise a "common language", not only to overcome the threat of fascism, but also to place in power a "transitional" government which would, by its very existence, "strike a major blow at capitalism."<sup>18</sup>

Without doubt, there were militant Welsh miners who identified enthusiastically with this interpretation of contemporary political and economic trends.<sup>19</sup> Their leaders were, however, prone to view the coalowners in rather a more restrained fashion, for it is now obvious that if, as the Comintern's argument ran, the coalowners (as monopoly capitalists) were prepared to aid and encourage the spawning of "fascism", then Communist leaders of the calibre of Arthur Horner were guilty of negotiating with "pro-fascists" under circumstances which were as amicable and efficient as both sides could arrange. In addition, the Communist leaders seldom objected in any way to sitting on Joint Conciliation Boards with "pro-fascists", or even to taking tea with them in railway station buffets whilst chatting and reassuring each other that neither wanted to see the future destruction of the coalfield as a result of violent class conflict.<sup>20</sup>

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18 Eric Hobsbawm, op.cit., p.224.

19 Hywel Francis, op.cit., p.183.

20 See A. Horner, op.cit., p.147: "My election (as President of the SWMF) appeared to be a surprise to the Press. At once they were full of warnings about what was going to happen now that this stormy petrel (i.e.Horner) was in the seat of power. They appeared to believe that I was going to start revolutionary movements all over South Wales. The owners, too, were uncertain what was going to happen, and soon after my election I received a request to meet informally Iestyn Williams, Secretary of the South Wales Coalowners Association ...

20 (Continued)

I arranged to meet him in the railway tea-room at Swansea on my way from Llanelli where I was living at the time. Iestyn asked me whether I was going to make trouble on the coalfields and asked, "What are your intentions?" I said, "If the class war is going to continue as bitterly as it has in the past, there is going to be the greatest trouble." He said, "I have come to persuade you that there is no need to destroy the coalfield to secure benefits for your men and that within reason the owners are prepared to make concessions."

I told him that the last thing I wanted to do was to destroy the coalfields which were the source of livelihood for the men I represented, but that if they wanted a fight, I knew more ways of fighting than they had dreamed of. We reached a tentative sort of agreement that they would see what they could do to improve the conditions in the coalfields, and I on my side would do what I could to see that there were no unnecessary disputes."



The reasons for this apparent difference of attitude amongst Communist leaders and led towards the owners are quite obvious. The fact that American and British monopoly capitalists, including coal-combine companies like Powell Duffryn, eventually entered into production for the Allies against the Axis powers argues quite clearly that there was no simple correlation between the growth of monopoly capitalism and support amongst monopoly capitalists for fascism.<sup>21</sup> Arthur Horner may, on occasions, have used to stirring effect slogans which equated coal companies like Powell Duffryn with fascism, but it is quite obvious from his later assessment of the coalowners' leaders that he never seriously regarded them as the British counterparts of Kierdorf and Thyssen.<sup>22</sup>

Horner's amicable tea-room parley with Iestyn Williams at Swansea railway station in 1936 (see Footnote 20) for example, indicates that Horner understood more clearly than did many of his contemporary trade-union "militants" the nature of the relationship between modern trade unionism and the industrial organisations of the capitalists. Indeed, to portray Horner's action in this instance as one smacking of class treachery, or even as the action of an unprincipled hypocrite, would serve

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21 Eric Hobsbawm, op.cit., p.224.

22 Horner, in his autobiography, describes the Chairman of the Coal-Owners' Association, Sir Evan Williams, for instance, as "an astute man, ... a foeman worthy of our steel. Whenever you met Evan Williams you knew if he made an agreement he would keep it." (A. Horner, op.cit., p.154) - hardly an epitaph of a pro-fascist written by a Communist. Sir Evan Williams was also a director of the Powell Duffryn Combine.

only to emphasise that the errors of definition and judgement as to what constitutes the role of a trade union leader in capitalist society persist even to the present day. Horner, for one, was always extremely clear as to what his role entailed. He did not make the error of arguing that each instance of militant trade union action automatically ensured that another nail had been slammed into the coffin of capitalism. He saw the main function of the trade union leader as endeavouring "to sell a commodity" - namely, labour power. Similarly, he saw the main function of the employer as buying that commodity:

"Whether the employer be the State, a private owner or a co-operative organization, this transaction of buying and selling labour still has to be carried out.

Once you accept that view, the rule has to apply in a capitalist society and, with different factors involved, in a Socialist society as well. You have to seek to place the buyer in the position where he cannot buy from anybody except you. This of course is the basis for the drive for one hundred per cent trade unionism."<sup>23</sup>

He understood that trade unions, as they existed in Britain in the 1930s and 1940s, were neither revolutionary institutions nor political parties and that they played an integral role in the industrial life of British society as in most capitalist societies. He recognised that trade unions do not, in themselves, represent the interests of the working class, but the interests of their

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23 A. Horner, op.cit., p.148.

members and he did not believe that trade unionism "naturally" converted working men to socialism or, indeed, that socialism would only occur when all men were trade unionists.<sup>24</sup> He recognised the inherently contradictory and ambivalent nature of trade unionism under capitalism:

"... on the one hand a protest and defence against the economic and human deprivations imposed on workers by their role in capitalist industry: on the other a means of accommodation to the political economy of capitalist industry. This in turn reflects the contradictory pressures inherent in trade union organisation and collective bargaining activity: on the one hand the expression of the basic conflict of interest between employers and employees ... on the other the development of a stable and compatible bargaining relationship. Hence the curious phenomenon of "antagonistic co-operation" ... the constant interpretation of conflictual and collaborative aspects of trade unionism."<sup>25</sup>

"Antagonistic co-operation" defines very well the role of Horner's SWMF Executive Council during the period 1936-1941, and serves also to explain why, in Horner's opinion, it was of vital importance that his Executive should be seen by one and

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24 A. Horner, op.cit., p.208 : When he stated that his "faith in Socialism" was "confirmed" by his experience of the early years of nationalisation he was stating, implicitly, that those miners who, by their "wage militancy", harassed the combined efforts of a "sympathetic and progressive" Labour Government, NCB and NUM to "make nationalization work" were, by their actions harassing the construction of socialism in Britain.

25 "Workers Control and Revolutionary Theory", from the Socialist Register 1974 (R. Miliband and J. Saville eds.), pp.257-8, Quoted in Geoff Roberts, "The Strategy of Rank & File", Marxism Today, December 1976, p.377.

all to be completely "in command" of its own ranks.<sup>26</sup> To co-operate with employers in any fashion, be it antagonistically or otherwise, all trade union executives must perforce be able to command discipline amongst their union's members. Such a requirement means, almost inevitably, that clashes will occur when the "immediate" demands of sections of the rank and file conflict with the longer term agreements arranged between union executive and employers.

The Bwllfa disputes<sup>27</sup> were examples of inter-union conflicts of this sort, and they were typical of hundreds which occurred in the coal industry throughout the period 1936-1957. Indeed, Horner faced one such "conflict" very shortly after his election as SWMF President in 1936, when he attempted to extricate some semblance of order from the bitter dispute which had been ranging at Bedwas colliery over the existence there of a "Company Union".

The owners of the colliery informed him that they were carrying more than a million pounds of debt and that a strike of even a week's duration would almost certainly close the pit permanently. Rather than risk the source of livelihood of well over a thousand employees, Horner set out, as he says "to get the best possible agreement", admitting as he did so that it would be necessary to "make some concessions" in order to achieve that agreement:<sup>28</sup>

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26 A. Horner, op.cit., p.152.

27 See above, Chapters 3 and 4.

28 A. Horner, op.cit., p.151.

"To the credit of the members of the old Bedwas lodge they agreed. I was attacked by some of my left-wing colleagues because I made these concessions. But I was convinced it was the correct decision. As I said in a message to the coalfield after the agreement had been signed, "The Bedwas Agreement will be carried out by us. We will see that it is carried out by the company. It has not endangered coal-field solidarity. It has paved the way, in a period of general weakness, for the final elimination of scab unionism from the South Wales Coalfield. Let the "rights" sneer, who failed with men and money to win Bedwas. Let the "lefts" who secured isolation for themselves and security for scab unionism jeer. The fact is, that scientifically applied class struggle has given us Bedwas ... we have gone a long way towards the objective of maximum results, with the least damage to our forces." 29

This was not to be the last time that militant rank and filers within the Miners' Union were to accuse Horner of "selling out" and "betraying" his members. We shall see, however, that what these accusations usually indicated was a difference of opinion as to what constituted a "reasonable" compromise. Horner's apparent readiness to make concessions to the owners in the cause of Federation unity may frequently have brought upon him loud criticism from some of his more militant members, but his actions and their accusations reflected, above all else, what Tony Lane has called the "dilemma that mutually embraced both leaders and followers"<sup>30</sup> - namely, the problem of having to negotiate and renegotiate "order within the constraints set by a capitalist economy and a capitalist state."<sup>31</sup>

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29 Ibid., pp.151-152.

30 Tony Lane, "The Union Makes us Strong", London 1974, p.77.

31 R. Hyman, op.cit., p.91; quoted in Geoff Roberts, op.cit. p.377.

These "constraints" are not, however, immutable. They change as the nature of the state and economy changes - most obviously when there is a shift from slump to boom. It was such a change which occurred during the years 1938-1940 in the South Wales coal industry. The enormous increase in demand which accompanied the outbreak of war brought with it an urgent requirement to raise productivity and output. It was a situation which might well have placed the miners' union in a stronger bargaining position than that in which it had found itself during the 1930s, but the political nature of the Second World War complicated matters for certain influential Welsh miners' leaders and for large sections of their union's rank-and-file. New "constraints" were imposed upon them, not only by the Government and coalowners, but also by the miners themselves who concluded that what was needed to provide sufficient coal for the defeat of the fascist armies was a greater degree of industrial co-operation than had been obtained previously.

Public statements from the lips of SWMF leaders equating Powell Duffryn with "fascism" disappeared as the Germans advanced. Horner's advocacy of "antagonistic co-operation" became (especially after June 1941) a little less antagonistic. In March 1940, for instance, he accompanied the Secretary of the Monmouthshire and South Wales Coalowners' Association, Iestyn Williams, as guest of honour at a post-rugby match supper and informed his audience of university teachers, engineering students and local dignitaries that, during the months which had followed the outbreak of war, "... the game of negotiation had been

played according to the rules.", and he added that he believed that the "whole secret of success" lay in the fact that agreements were "strictly kept." Staying in this conciliatory vein, he went as far as to admit that concern for the welfare of mineworkers was felt, not only by the Federation, but by the Coalowners too.<sup>33</sup>

This was extending the concept of "popular frontism" to previously unheard-of limits. But then, Horner was no stranger to the delights of off-limit territory. As the war progressed, his version of "popular frontism" became transformed and at no moment was this transformation more spectacular than after the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. Until that date, Horner and his fellow Communists had been hamstrung politically by having to defend the Nazi-Soviet Agreement at the same time as Nazi bombs were falling on Swansea and Cardiff. After that date, they were able to devote much of their considerable energies and skills into the encouragement of industrial co-operation in an effort to raise production.

This co-operation, they argued, was a logical extension of popular-frontism. Almost anything and everything was defended in this way. The comrades saw nothing contradictory, for example, in the broadcasting of patriotic speeches by Horner and Lawther in August 1941<sup>34</sup> and in the spectacle afforded by Ernest Bevin's public defence of the man who had sought to demolish him and the rest of the TUC General Council in 1926.<sup>35</sup>

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33 C.G., 5.8.41.

34 For quite a different reaction to the spectacle, see M. Foot, "Aneurin Bevan", Vol. 1., Chapters 10 & 11, pp.300-380.

35 Ibid.

Indeed, though both Lawther and Horner qualified their appeals (for increased production) with heavy, backhanded swipes at the Government's refusal to come to terms with the underlying problem of the need for a complete reorganisation of the coal industry, they nevertheless displayed great loyalty to the Labour Party's general line concerning political and industrial co-operation in wartime; in Lawther's case because he was by this time situated politically in the centre-right of the Labour Party, and in Horner's because Moscow demanded a Second Front - a development which automatically would preclude major strikes with their inevitable loss of production. In return for these displays of co-operation and loyalty, however, both men expected from the Government expressions of its firm commitment to nationalisation in the near future - expectations which undoubtedly were shared by the majority of union members, most of whom were, of course, Labour Party supporters. Will Lawther spoke for many of them in 1944, for example, when he argued that the last thing the coal industry needed was the introduction of a set of proposals (aimed at streamlining the industry) which the Coalowners had floated in the Spring of that year and which consisted of plans for the amalgamation of all existing units of production into 25 great combines which would produce the whole of Britain's output:

"Another twenty four Powell Duffryns will not solve the problem ..", he argued, "... Cheap coal can only be obtained by efficient organization of the coal industry ... and the only way this can be achieved is through public ownership of the mines." 36

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36 Will Lawther, "Foreward" to M. Hienemann, "Britain's Coal", op.cit., p.11.



The "antagonistic co-operation" of the sort developed by Horner in the late 1930s was consciously modified by the miners' leaders to accommodate the demands imposed by wartime production, but if the "antagonism" became largely subdued during the early years of the war, the Government and Owners were allowed to harbour no illusions concerning the nature of the accommodation. It was a temporary one. Emphasising this, Lawther warned all who would listen in 1944 that:

"The miners are in a critical and dangerous mood. They are the most generous people in the world, but they also have memories ... These memories are at work now, in this nation's gravest hour. Only the nationalisation of the mines can win the confidence of the miners. Britain stands on the eve of the most decisive battles in this war for freedom from Fascism. I have said all over this country that the miners are the Commandos on the Home Front. They will, despite all the provocation they are subjected to from the coalowners and from Government, fulfil their responsibilities to the nation, but the nation must also fulfil its responsibilities to the miners."<sup>37</sup>

There were some amongst the miners, however, who believed that Horner and Lawther had pushed the limits of "popular frontism" into dangerous territory. Whispers of "betrayal" were heard and whole workforces appeared reluctant to "fulfil their responsibilities" without having first received concrete assurances that there was to be no repeat of the Government's double-cross of the miners at the end of the First World War.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.13.

Shortly after Lawther's warning was published, for example, the South Wales pitmen struck work in protest against the insufficiencies of the Porter Award wage increases. They caused acute embarrassment to the advocates of the wartime "popular front". The Communist Party, for example, admitted in the pages of the Daily Worker that the strikers had a "powerful case" but instead of supporting them, it advocated that they return to work:

"The miners know that the Daily Worker is their friend and that there is no ulterior motive in the advice we give; that there are no vested interests lurking behind our columns. And our advice to the South Wales miners is: GO BACK TO WORK ...

By going back now the miners can knock a weapon out of the hands of the despicable gang of pro-Fascists and anti-Second Fronters, who have gleefully seized on this dispute to disrupt the fighting unity of Britain's workers and soldiers, and to delay the day when Britain's full strength takes the field by the side of the Red Army." 38

Such pleas to the conscience of the coalminers were, understandably, common enough during wartime, but they did not disappear with the defeat of the Axis powers; they were to be echoed time and again during the following decade by Labour and Tory governments and by Labour and Communist trade union leaders. The amorphous mish-mash of popular-frontism survived the war to manifest itself quite clearly in the form of the

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38 Daily Worker, 11.3.44.

near-universal "progressive" support for the nationalising Labour Government. The NUM, in particular, distinguished itself in this respect when it showed its gratitude for the Government's Nationalisation Act by pledging itself to continue to co-operate with management in persuading its members to accept re-ass<sup>ess</sup>ments of work which they knew would mean, in many places, cutting down the number of men required for a particular piece of work. The Union under<sup>s</sup>t<sup>k</sup>ood that it would "not countenance any restriction of effort by workmen resulting in failure to perform the work so assessed."<sup>39</sup>

The dangers of an agreement which served to bind the union to help the employers bring pressure on its own members were quite obvious at the time of signing.<sup>40</sup> They were, however, brushed aside by the vanguard of "progressive" unity; the "war-crisis" was metamorph<sup>o</sup>sed into the "fuel-crisis" and the common enemy was no longer proclaimed as being "fascism"; it became, after 1945, "retarded economic recovery".

Nationalisation, the old demand of the miners, communists and Labour Left (i.e. the central phalanx of the British "united front"), was chosen as the most spectacular of the new weapons with which the Attlee Government would deal with these problems.

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39 Ministry of Labour Gazette, May 1947.

40 Recording of Will Paynter, November 1976, London.

## Part Two : The War Years

### Chapter Six

1939 - 1942

Dramatic though the political events of the Summer and early Autumn of 1939 were, they had little immediate impact upon labour relations in the South Wales coal industry. August witnessed sixteen strikes in fifteen different collieries; September, fourteen; eight occurred during the fortnight surrounding the declaration of war itself. October and November witnessed a total of thirty five new strikes, and it was December before the monthly figure dropped to a point low enough to be interpreted as an indication that the miners of South Wales were heeding the pleas of their Government to "put aside" industrial differences in the face of the "common foe".<sup>1</sup>

Just eight days after the declaration of war, the SWMF hinted that it would be prepared to sanction industrial action in order to protect its members' standards of living in the event of sudden increases in the cost of food and clothing.<sup>2</sup> In the west, the combine committee of the Amalgamated Anthracite

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1 Figures obtained from the Ministry of Labour's "Dispute Books", PRO, Lab 34/35.

2 Colliery Guardian, 15.9.39.

Company's workmen reaffirmed its earlier decision to press for the establishment of a shorter working shift on Saturdays and advised its members to leave their mines at 12 noon from October 7th onwards - with or without the approval of management.<sup>3</sup> Within a fortnight of the declaration, a joint meeting of miners' M.P.s and Federation leaders announced their intention to set up "Vigilance Committees" throughout the coalfield. Based on the colliery lodges, these committees were organised to check movements in the cost of living and to "blacklist" those who sought to profiteer from the disruption caused by the outbreak of hostilities.<sup>4</sup>

On September 9th, the Industrial Relations Officer for the Welsh region reported to the Minister of Labour that the declaration of war "has produced in industrial circles a feeling of unreality, and the position, at the moment, is not clearly defined."<sup>5</sup> In fact, the position of the coal industry in South Wales had been ill-defined for a considerable period before the declaration of war and the disruptions of 1939 followed familiar patterns.

South Wales' leading markets were France, Italy and South America. In France and Italy special factors had been operating for several years to restrict Welsh sales.<sup>6</sup> French import

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3 Ibid., 29.9.39.

4 Ibid., 22.9.39.

5 PRO, Lab 10/365, Report for Week Ending henceforth (RWE) 9.9.39.

6 "Second Industrial Survey of South Wales", Vol. 1, pp.44-54.

restrictions, which generally bore more harshly upon Britain than on other supplying countries, hit South Wales particularly keenly, while the spectacular decline in Italian trade, which dated from the Abyssinian War and its accompanying "sanctions", was a blow from which South Wales was still only slowly recovering by 1939. The growth of German competition in South America had, since the mid-Thirties, been a serious obstacle to industrial revival on the coalfield, whilst the Spanish civil war had hit the district's exports with especial severity as Welsh coals had always held a predominant position in the Spanish market. In addition, the Welsh coalowners frequently expressed great dissatisfaction with the reciprocal trade agreements arranged by the British Government (from 1937-39) with the governments of a number of European countries. They argued that such agreements not only failed to benefit the South Wales coalfield, but by stimulating the exports of Northumberland and Durham and Scottish coalfields at the expense of German and Polish coals, the Government succeeded in diverting the competition of the latter to markets in which Wales was particularly interested. For example, the German and Polish coals excluded from Scandanavia as a result of the reciprocal trade pacts with Norway, Sweden and Denmark, were diverted, to a large extent, to Italy, South America and Spain where South Wales had to meet intensified competition.<sup>7</sup>

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7 Colliery Guardian, 5.1.40.

The signs of recovery evident in the Welsh coal industry after 1935 had effectively disappeared by the Summer of 1938. A trade slump had caused the lay-off of thousands of men and the closures of many collieries. In May 1938, approximately 135,000 coalminers were employed in the coalfield. As demand fell from June onwards, the numbers employed fell to 130,800 at the start of 1939 and declined further to 124,000 by the end of March.<sup>8</sup>

In the months which followed, European re-armament and a revival in the home market produced an upturn in coal demand which failed to reflect itself in increased South Wales exports until the declaration of war in September when the coalfield was called upon to make good the cessation of German and Polish exports to France, Italy and South America.<sup>9</sup> Production was oversold almost before it became available and efforts were made to boost output by re-opening seams which previously had been closed and even by re-opening pits which had stood idle for many years. It soon became obvious, however, that such tinkering would not succeed in achieving anything like the results which were needed and, in April 1940, the Government intervened in an

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8 Ibid.

9 At the outbreak of war, Germany was exporting 25 million tons a year; Poland 14 million; Belgium 5 million; Holland 3.6 million; France 1 million and Britain 36 million. Germany and Poland between them, exported 480,000 tons per month to France and 630,000 tons per month to Italy. Germany in 1939 was committed to export some 400,000 tons to South America during the first half-year.  
Colliery Guardian, 5.1.40.

attempt to re-organize production. The Coal Production Council was set up under the Chairmanship of Lord Portal, with a view to "securing a further increase in coal exports to Allied and other countries as well as maintaining supplies for all essential home purposes."<sup>10</sup>

The Council aimed at securing an increase of between 30 and 40 million tons of coal per annum from British pits, 10 million of which was to come from South Wales where the Council hoped to promote the re-opening of idle mines, a reduction of avoidable absenteeism, the voluntary return to the mining industry of men who had left during the years of depression to work in other occupations, the maintenance of an uninterrupted cycle of operations at collieries where machine mining was in operation, and a decrease in the numbers of strikes and go-slows.<sup>11</sup> The Council was unable, however, to prevent large tonnages of coal "leaking" from the officially designated markets into unknown, or "black", markets,<sup>12</sup> and important revisions in the Government's powers of control were introduced to remedy this. In March 1940, the Board of Trade was empowered "to specify the coal, quantity, size, the particular use, or consumption to which the coal is to be applied ... whether for export or inland ... and the person to whom it may be offered."<sup>13</sup>

The result was that the bulk of Welsh coal available for

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10 C.G., 12.4.40.

11 Ibid., 4.1.41.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.



export became earmarked for France and Italy whilst releases for other markets were much curtailed. The German invasion of Holland and Belgium cut French coal supplies by another 7 million tons and further inflated the demand for Welsh coal. To meet the crisis, South Wales miners decided, for the first time in their history, to work a full regular Sunday night producing shift - a remarkable decision in as much as they previously had always displayed hostility to the idea of coal-cutting on Sundays, the shifts at night having been almost exclusively devoted to repair work.

The coal demand eased slightly when Italy entered the war in June 1940, but on the eve of France's capitulation to Germany, Welsh pits were working at top pressure to ensure that Britain's ally was not short of coal. Welsh exports were virtually confined to France and orders from other, valued, customers were pushed aside. The surrender of France in June, therefore, produced a sensational change in the market situation. Almost overnight, a condition of acute coal scarcity was transformed into a glut. Many cargoes on their way to France had to be diverted, whilst a number of ships in French ports awaiting discharge rushed back to Britain.<sup>14</sup>

The Welsh coal market was thrown into terrific confusion. New business became impossible. Pits were made idle, unemployment rose sharply, and the exporters searched feverishly for alternative markets. The worst effects were felt in the dry-steam and anthracite producing areas of the field (Monmouthshire and the bituminous pits,

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

with their steady home trade fared better) and, to cap it all, South Wales suffered during the last months of 1940 what the Miners' Federation termed a "virtual blockade" of its coalfield as a result of severe organisational difficulties on the railways. At various times during November and December, upwards of 100,000 tons of coal were held up in wagons; some of it had been labelled for customers since the previous August.

The result was the closure of almost two-thirds of the anthracite pits and the lay-off of over half of the anthracite workforce.<sup>15</sup> The Fall of France alone accounted for the laying-off of 12,000 Welsh miners<sup>16</sup> and the Government introduced measures designed to induce this new "surplus" to transfer its labour to other occupations. The reserved age was raised, local tribunals were set up to "comb out" layed-off miners for the armed forces whilst Ministry of Labour training centres drafted large numbers of miners for factory work. These measures served, not only to wipe out the surplus but also to erode seriously the labour force which remained working in the pits.

The SWMF protested at what it called the imposition of this "discriminatory call-up" on the South Wales coalfield. It was,

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15 Ibid., 13.12.40: of 24,000 miners normally employed in the anthracite field, 13,000 were idle, despite the fact that the Amalgamated Anthracite Company alone had inland orders sufficient to keep 75% of its personnel at work.

16 C.G., 13.12.40.

they argued, an imposition which had been caused by a depression which ought never<sup>to</sup> have been allowed to come about and which "ought to be immediately remedied."<sup>16</sup> The Federation's Executive Council successfully put forward a resolution to a special conference of miners' delegates in Cardiff demanding that any raising of the age of reservation should be applied equally to the manpower of the whole industry and that an equal proportion of miners should be taken from each coalfield and that South Wales should not have to suffer a permanent loss of its productive capacity as a result of short-term measures introduced to correct mistakes induced by bad management during the previous year.<sup>17</sup>

The manpower position was threatened further by the voluntary drift of miners towards higher paid jobs in the munitions industries. Horner claimed in March 1941 that about 500 miners were leaving the pits every week by getting doctors' certificates saying that they were no longer fit for the arduous work of the mines: "Could it be wondered", he asked, "that men getting £3 a week should adopt such devices to gain employment in relatively comfortable factories at £6 a week?"<sup>18</sup>

Despite a solemn warning issued both by miners' leaders and coalowners that the drain of manpower could seriously affect future production, it was allowed to continue. By March 1941, colliery companies were complaining that they were so short of men that they

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16 C.G., 13.12.40.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 2.1.42.

were unable to fulfil their contracts. The manpower shortage was estimated at around 10,000<sup>19</sup> but never during 1941, was this made good.

Management and union attempted alternative solutions to the problem. They agreed, for example, to introduce 24 hour production at pits where that was practicable; similar agreements saw the introduction of weekend working and the constitution of pit production committees which were set up to organise the local output drives and to take steps to stamp out "avoidable" absenteeism, generally regarded as being one of the major causes of lost production. None of these developments had any great effect however; production continued to fall throughout the war - despite the fact that the operation of the Essential Work Order succeeded in temporarily arresting the decline in manpower by 1942. As one historian has put it, the "ill-favoured birds of the depression years had come home to roost. The nation paid now for its neglect of coal between the wars."<sup>20</sup>

Within three days of the declaration of war a provisional agreement was drawn up between the SWMF and the Coalowners' Association under which stoppages resulting from the employment of non-union labour in Welsh pits could be "avoided". It was, in effect, a recognition by the owners that the principle of a closed shop would have to be granted the miners if they, the owners, were to reap the fruits of the wartime boom.

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19 Ibid.

20 Angus Calder, The People's War, London 1971, p.504.

The eradication of non-unionism had been a chief aim of the SWMF since their defeat of the "Company" union on the coalfield in 1938, and the new agreement, though overshadowed by the declaration of war, represented a triumphant culmination to the SWMF's "closed shop" campaign.

The agreement occurred when it did, not because of any sudden change of heart or recognition of defeat by the owners, but because of the apparently insatiable demand for Welsh coal in the last quarter of 1939. Rich pickings were in the offing and the owners were very much aware of the disruptive effects which mass actions against non-unionism could cause.<sup>21</sup> Throughout the 1930s, the owners had refused stubbornly to arrive at any formal agreement with the SWMF on the "closed shop" question - despite the great bitterness which the issue aroused in communities right across the coalfield. They had, on the contrary, actively encouraged the growth of Company unionism and condemned vehemently the harassment of non-unionists by Federation members.<sup>22</sup> October 1939 was a particularly opportune date upon which to accede to this Federation demand,

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21 Disruption continued even after the signing of the agreement: at Penrikyber Colliery in January 1941, for instance, 1,300 Powell Duffryn workmen threatened strike action over the continued employment there of 50 non-unionists. Aberdare Leader, 12.1.40.

22 The directors and managers of the Ocean Coal and Powell Duffryn companies were especially active in this respect: see D. Smith, *op.cit.*, and Chapters 1 and 2 above.

not only because company order books were full to overflowing, but also because the Owners lost no public face; the country was in the midst of a dire crisis, our allies were in desperate need of coal. The Owners were able to argue, with justification, that they were sacrificing a long-cherished principle for the sake of maintaining a Britain free from Nazi domination. They were, in addition, gaining a further "reward", the true value of which they were to appreciate more fully during the final two years of the war. It took the form of an easing of their burden of having to enforce obedience amongst their employees to the terms of joint agreements. As such, it was the first of many wartime agreements which were to throw the onus for the maintenance of uninterrupted production onto the shoulders of the SWMF Executive. It would, henceforward, be impossible for the Executive to cast the blame for outbursts of unofficial militancy onto those Federation members understandably frustrated at the "problem" of having to work alongside non-unionists or "scabs". Having attained the right to be recognised as the sole industrial representatives of the South Wales miners, the Federation Executive now had to be seen to be capable of commanding discipline amongst its ranks.

Its first test occurred almost immediately. It concerned negotiations which were being conducted by the MFGB Executive to obtain from the Owners an immediate increase in wages and a further provision which would allow subsequent adjustments of wages to the cost of living index figure.

The Owners floated a provisional offer of an 8d per shift increase for miners over 21 years of age and 4d for those under. It was accepted by the MFGB Executive as "the best obtainable under the circumstances"<sup>23</sup> and the colliery lodges were recommended to agree by endorsing their acceptance at a pithead ballot. The Ministry of Labour's Industrial Relations Officer for Wales, W.R. Puton, duly reported the outcome:

"When the result of the voting by the Lodges of the SWMF on the Coalowners' wage offer was announced, and it became known that the terms had been rejected by the (South Wales) men, much surprise was expressed in view of the recommendation of the Executive Council in favour of acceptance of the proposals. The lead of the Executive was thought to be sufficiently strong to influence the decisions of the lodges, and it is regarded as an unusual occurrence for the ruling of the Executive to be reversed on a major issue." <sup>24</sup>

Soon after the rejection, however, Horner convinced a delegate conference in Cardiff that this "rift" between rank-and-file and union officers would serve only to strengthen the "divisive" tactics of the owners. He proposed, instead, a compromise whereby the delegates advised their lodge members to accept the offer "on the understanding that there should be a review of the position on December 31st".<sup>25</sup> Until that date, the lodge committees were advised to press on with the formation of "Vigilance Committees"

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23 Colliery Guardian, 27.10.39.

24 PRO, Lab 10/365, RWE 28.10.39.

25 C.G., 27.10.39.

which would help regulate prices and stamp out the most obvious kinds of profiteering. The delegates' acceptance of the recommendations was received "with much relief" by the Welsh Industrial Relations' Officer who declared that a rejection could have seen "some of the bitterness of the old struggles ... renewed."<sup>26</sup>

By December, however, anxiety must once more have clouded Puton's vision. The Owners had retracted their "provisional" offer of an 8d per shift increase for adults and replaced it with a "definite and final" offer of 4d per shift, (2d per shift for those under 21) which the MFGB promptly rejected - a move which was overwhelmingly approved of at a coalfield delegate conference in Cardiff.<sup>27</sup> The SWMF leadership expressed its dismay at the Owners' actions and re-emphasised the need to formulate a system whereby wages would rise with wartime inflation. In so doing, Horner and his fellow Executive officers articulated the sentiments of the vast majority of their members<sup>28</sup> and, at the same time, improved the "fighting" image of the Executive by openly identifying it with the spirit of impatience and the mood of frustrated disquiet which prevailed amongst a great many of the coalfield's members. This maintenance of an "united front" was felt to be essential in view of the added difficulties which were facing certain of the key union officers as a result of the acrimonious "Imperialist War" debate conducted on the coalfield (as it was conducted

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26 PRO, Lab 10/365, RWE 28.10.39.

27 C.G., 21.12.39.

28 The coalfield's lodges voted heavily against the MFGB recommended offer from the owners (in February 1940) of 5d per shift increase for men and 2½d for boys.



nationally) from August 1939 to June 1941.

The debate's main protagonists were those miners' leaders who also happened to be active (and often prominent) members of the Labour and Communist Parties. The non-aggression pact between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany had subjected the spirit of political "united frontism" to very great strains. Members of the Labour Party condemned the pact as a "betrayal" and a "stab in the back", whilst Communists searched the columns of the Daily Worker for convincing explanations of what to most seemed an illogical political aberration.<sup>29</sup>

For Labour Party members there was no such problem. Foot recalls how Nye and Jennie Bevan received the news of the declaration of war:

"We had discussed all this so often and so much," wrote Jennie, "now at last it has come. Our enemy Hitler had become the national enemy." A sense of relief mixed with presentiments about the unknown horrors ahead. Nye symbolized the occasion by playing on the gramophone some of the Spanish marching songs which he had brought back on records from Spain. These, with a few of his favourite Welsh choruses, often did service at such moments in reviving his spirit. That the war had to be fought he never doubted. The cause was just, however much it might have been tarnished by Chamberlain and the Munichites through the preceeding years." 30

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29 Horner wrote later, "When the Soviet Government, convinced that neither Britain nor France had any real intention to sign a treaty of mutual assistance, decided to sign a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany... I was terribly shocked ... while I understood why the Soviet Union had taken this step, I did not believe for one moment that it had altered the basic danger of Fascism to the world." Horner, op.cit., p.161.

30 M. Foot, op.cit., pp.304-305.

The Declaration of Policy issued by the Labour Party in February 1940, under the title "Labour, the War and the Peace", contained the following:

"For Socialism and Freedom. Loyal in its Socialist and democratic faith, and fully maintaining its opposition to the Chamberlain Government, the Labour Party calls upon the British people to contribute their utmost effort to the overthrow of the Hitler system in Germany. The overthrow is essential to the achievement of Labour's programme of social justice, the maintenance and extension of democratic liberties and the building of a peaceful commonwealth of free peoples.

Britain in the past has led the world in the development of Parliamentary democracy and civil freedom. If these precious gains are not now to perish, it is imperative to break the evil power of totalitarian tyranny in Europe. The Labour Party, therefore, unreservedly supports the Allied war of resistance to Nazi aggression because, though loathing war, it regards this war as a lesser evil than the slavery which finally would be the only alternative."

The Declaration lamented the fact that the Soviet Union had seen fit not to "join with the Democracies for the collective organisation of peace and resistance to aggression.", and it condemned the "clumsiness of the British Government in its earlier relations with the Soviet Union." But the Labour leaders were not about to excuse the Russian Government's "Pact with the Nazis" on the eve of the war ... "Much less its unprovoked attack on Finland in shameless imitation of the Nazi technique in foreign policy. We should regard the extinction of the Free Finnish democracy as an intolerable disaster for civilization."

For most Communists, the 22 months following September 1939, were to prove extremely confusing and often unhappy; confusing because of the difficulty which Party members experienced when attempting to follow the changes in the official "line"; unhappy because the Party's popularity fell quite dramatically - especially during the Soviet Union's invasion of Finland in November 1939.<sup>31</sup>

At the time of the German aggression against Czechoslovakia, the CPGB opposed the effort of the Chamberlain Government to reach agreement with Hitler and urged instead a policy of alliance with Russia:

"There must be no further confidence in Chamberlain. Labour must stand firm in Parliament today and give a lead which will rally all the truly patriotic and progressive forces in Parliament against the shameful Munich betrayal." <sup>32</sup>

In March 1939, the CP issued an appeal to Churchill and the Liberal and Labour leaders to form a new government; the Daily Worker reported it as follows:

"In a swift and sensational move to get practical action to save the country in the rapidly deepening crisis, Harry Pollitt, on behalf of the Communist Party of Great Britain, yesterday addressed to Major Atlee, ... Sir Archibald Sinclair, ... and Mr. Winston Churchill, most prominent of the Conservative "rebels", an appeal that they shall "get together without another minute's delay." <sup>33</sup>

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31 H. Pelling, op.cit., pp.113-114.

32 Claud Cockburn, "Crossing the Line", London 1958, p.79.

33 Daily Worker, 3.3.39.

Six months later, when war broke out, this was still the Communist Party's policy, for, despite the "complications" which accompanied the news of the Nazi-Soviet pact, the CPGB officially and wholeheartedly supported the war and urged the removal of the existing government in order to make the prosecution of the war more effective. On the eve of the declaration of war, the Party's Central Committee issued the following manifesto:

"You are now being called upon to take part in the most cruel war in the history of the world.

One that need never have taken place. One that could have been avoided in the very last days of the crisis, had we had a People's Government in Britain.

Now that the war has come, we have no hesitation in stating the policy of the Communist Party.

We are in support of all necessary measures to secure the victory of democracy over Fascism.

But Fascism will not be defeated by the Chamberlain Government.

The first and most vital step to victory is a new Government in the hands of trusted representatives of the people who have neither imperialist aims, nor latent sympathies with Fascism.

This is absolutely vital for any success in a war against Fascism abroad and the friends of Fascism in Britain." 34

The enthusiasm of the Party's leadership for victory over Hitler can be gauged from the Daily Worker's headline on September 5th; it ran "Hitler Touts Peace Offer : British and French People Reject Trick" Harry Pollitt, the General

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34 Ibid., 2.10.39.

Secretary of the CPGB, produced a pamphlet entitled "How to Win the War" which just reached the party bookstalls in time to witness the Moscow-induced change of "line".<sup>35</sup>

Pollitt was replaced as General Secretary by Willie Gallacher and, on October 4th 1939, the Daily Worker pronounced the new line:

"We are against the continuance of the war. We demand that negotiations be immediately opened for the establishment of peace in Europe." <sup>36</sup>

Horner declared later that he did not accept this change;<sup>37</sup> instead, he identified himself with the Pollitt-Campbell faction within the CPGB.<sup>38</sup> Like Pollitt, however, he remained within the Party and "adapted" to the new situation. Pollitt recanted his previous interpretation of the war and announced that his own rhetoric and involvement in the Spanish Civil War had led him to make the "error" of overestimating the Fascist danger abroad and obscuring the "true role of British Imperialism."<sup>39</sup> Horner gave his support to the People's Convention - a satellite body formed towards the end of 1940 by Communists and fellow travellers. The Convention produced a Charter which called for "Defence of the people's living standards. Defence of the people's democratic and trade union rights. Adequate air-raid precautions, deep bomb-

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35 H. Pelling, op.cit., p.110.

36 Daily Worker, 4.10.39.

37 A. Horner, op.cit., p.162.

38 H. Pelling, op.cit., p.112.

39 Ibid., p.114.

proof shelters, re-housing and relief for victims. Friendship with the Soviet Union. A people's government truly representative of the whole people and able to inspire the confidence of the working people of the world. A people's peace that gets rid of the causes of the war."<sup>40</sup>

What worried Bevin and other Labour leaders were the implications of the "aims". The anti-profiteering slogans of the Convention, for example, implied that workers should think twice before working overtime to meet the increased orders on their employers' books. In South Wales, the whole issue received considerable publicity after the convening of a special delegate conference in February to consider conflicting motions which had been submitted by Communist and Labour SWMF members. The Communist motion declared that the war was being fought for imperialist aims and not for the defence of democracy against fascism, that the French Government was using the war as an excuse for suppressing communism and attacking trade unions, and that the British Government was, by "regulation", (i.e. the Schedule of Reserved Occupations) attacking democratic liberty at home, and at the same time placing big businessmen in control of all key positions to defend profiteers. It called upon the labour movement to exert its energies to stop the war, and as a first step towards this, to end the political truce at Westminster.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Daily Worker, 1.10.40. The Convention was a successor to the "People's Vigilance Committee" which had been set up in the Summer of 1940 with aims similar to those listed in the Convention's Charter.

<sup>41</sup> PRO, Lab 10/365, RWE 24.2.40.

In reply, the Labour Party's motion argued that Labour had always advocated a policy of resistance to Fascist Germany and that now that the risks of war, always inherent in such a policy, had materialised, the Movement must stand firm in its decision to support the war. However, the motion alleged that neither the successful prosecution of the war, nor the building of a "people's peace" could be entrusted to the Chamberlain Government. It urged organised Labour to end the by-election truce and concentrate on establishing a Labour Government.<sup>42</sup>

The discussion occupied the greater part of an all-day sitting, and the conference then stood adjourned until March 2nd when a vote was to be taken after the delegates had received their mandates from the lodges. The result was a defeat for the Communists' motion by 97,000 votes to 30,500<sup>43</sup>. The Regional Industrial Relations Officer reported that "... even this substantial majority ... indicates a stronger element than actually exists, and reference is made to the anomalies of the lodge system, which frequently allow a small number of members to claim the right to express the views of hundreds or thousands who are unable or unwilling to attend the proceedings."<sup>44</sup>

The Regional Officer's allegations concerning the pro-war mood of the coalfield's workforce seems to have been borne out by the numbers of letters complaining about the attitude of the Federations' Leadership which were received by the SWMF

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42 Ibid.

43 SWMF Executive Committee Minutes, 2.3.40.

44 PRO, Lab 10/365, RWE 9.3.40

Executive Committee during the "Imperialist War" phase. Cwmcynon colliery lodge, for instance, protested not only against "the Executive Committee's attitude towards the war", but also against the decision to allow SWMF members to treat May Day as a normal celebratory holiday.<sup>45</sup> SWMF Secretary, Oliver Harris, replied that "over 20 lodges" had called for a debate on the nature of the war, and that, in relation to May Day, the delegate conference of February 17th had provided ample opportunity for those who wished to sacrifice the May Day "holiday" to express their views ... "but no one opposed the view put forward by the Executive Committee and no lodge has suggested that any change shall be made from what has been done on May Day, for many years."<sup>46</sup>

The public support which Horner gave to the People's Convention and Civil Liberties Defence Association helped further to upset certain of the more "orthodox" Labour lodge committees. In February 1941, for instance, Oliver Harris received the following letter from the Secretary of the Aperpergwm and Rock collieries joint lodge, Trevor Challacombe:

"My lodge committee has instructed me to write for further information on the South Wales Liberty Conference, Saturday March 15th. They want to know who is convening this Conference as in their view it is not in compliance with the view of the two SWMF Cardiff Conferences which agreed to support the continuation of the war against Hitler and his gang." 47

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45 Undated (late February 1940) letter from Cwmcynon Lodge Secretary, John Picton, to SWMF Secretary, Oliver Harris; SWMF Files, University College, Swansea.

46 Letter, dated 1.3.40., Harris to Picton; SWMF Files, Swansea.

47 Letter, dated 17.2.41., SWMF Files, Swansea (Challacombe's emphasis.)



Harris duly replied that the Conference was convened by the Civil Liberties Defence Association and found it necessary to remind the Aberpergwm and Rock lodge that the Association was "not prescribed by the Labour Party" and that "defence of our Civil Liberties (was) not by any means inconsistent with the Resolution of Conference on the War."<sup>48</sup>

Such complaints were far from uncommon and when they surfaced into the view of the general public they were invariably given a great deal of publicity by the South Wales press and particularly by the Western Mail which had long been the most vocal of Horner's public critics. He described his predicament at this time as being "very difficult and complicated".<sup>49</sup> He suffered for supporting the People's Convention and agreed later with his critics that the Convention's aims (to call on the workers in all belligerent countries to stop the war) were wildly optimistic : "We ought to have realized that Nazism had sapped the German working class to a point where we could not rely on them to take any decisive action at all."<sup>50</sup>

The Convention's line was, of course, almost indistinguishable from that peddled by the CPGB to defend the position of the Soviet Union. It emphasised the necessity for workers to maintain constant vigilance against capitalist encroachment of living standards and warned against succumbing to the patriotic jargon which both British and German governments used to slander those

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48 Letter, undated, SWMF Files, University College Swansea. (Aberpergwm envelope).

49 A. Horner, op.cit., p.163.

50 Ibid.

in their respective countries who would stand up and defend the rights of the working class.

It was a line calculated to appeal to men, who in the recent past, had equated the advance of fascism with the spread of monopoly capitalism,<sup>51</sup> and it found, in certain pits on the coalfield, an audience which was sympathetic in its response to this "alternative" interpretation of the war. Horner's call for the setting-up of "Vigilance Committees", for instance, was taken up with degrees of enthusiasm varying from "none" at Penallta,<sup>52</sup> to "great" in the Upper Dulais Valley where the "Seven Sisters Vigilance Committee" was seen to be organised on the basis of a fully-fledged combine committee which included in its ranks Communist militants like the young Dai Francis (at the time Honorary Secretary of the Onllwyn Vigilance Committee) and which conducted its affairs with such efficiency and verve that it caused the SWMF Executive considerable anxiety as the latter attempted to deduce whether or not the Committee constituted a threat as an alternative organ of leadership to that already elected in the area.<sup>53</sup>

The Communists' Imperialist War line, although it received a mixed reception and caused considerable controversy and debate within the SWMF, nevertheless did not split the union. Horner, already unhappy with having to toe his Party's line, addressed

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51 See above, Chapter 2.

52 Letter to Oliver Harris from the Secretary of Penallton Lodge, dated 8.1.40., SWMF Files, University College Swansea.

53 Letter from O. Harris to Secretary of Seven Sister's Vigilance Committee, Arthur Jones, dated October 1939, enquiring after the purpose of the organisation. SWMF Files, University College Swansea.

the Federation's annual conference in April 1940, and succeeded in finding for himself a way through the horns of his dilemma. He repeated his opinion that the war could have been prevented had the policy of the Government not isolated Britain from forces "favourable to peace". "Nevertheless," he continued, since the policy of the Federation, "after long discussions", had been decided as one of support for the war, and as long as he was President of the Federation, he would operate majority decisions - despite the fact that he did not agree with the majority on the war question.<sup>54</sup>

He was successful in maintaining this hazardous posture largely because his power-base amongst the rank and file extended beyond the relatively small caucus of CPGB members. He undoubtedly received additional support from large numbers of influential Labour Party members. It was a support strong enough to worry Transport House into issuing, in January 1941, a circular instructing its branches to expel any members who displayed active sympathy for the People's Convention. The order was duly obeyed. A few days after the publication of the circular, the South Wales Regional Industrial Relations Officer reported that "The activities of the People's Vigilance movement were discussed at a Conference of Aberdare Socialists held at Mountain Ash. The press were excluded from the meeting but it is understood that the Conference considered the expulsion of three members of the Socialist executive committee because of the part they played in

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<sup>54</sup> A. Horner, op.cit., p.163.

the issue of a manifesto issued by the People's Vigilance Society, and also expressed the view that the main object of the Movement was to sabotage all Socialist and trade-union effort. The Conference has been given some publicity in the local press and the Aberdare Socialists are generally applauded for their firm action against the representatives of the People's Vigilance Committees."<sup>55</sup>

Threats of expulsion were levelled even at County Councillors. In February 1941, for instance, Monmouthshire Regional Council of Labour condemned an unspecified number of such officers for their association with the Convention and warned that certain expulsion would follow if there was any sign of refusal on the part of the erring individuals to disassociate themselves immediately from the prescribed organization.<sup>56</sup>

Similar noises were heard inside the SWMF where Government supporters stepped up their attacks on Horner. They alleged that his "bias towards Communism" compromised his loyalty to the Federation<sup>57</sup> - charges which almost certainly would have caused no appreciable stir in less frenetic times but which were weighted during the early months of 1941 with the anger and concern generated upon the coalfield by the Nazi bombing raids on Cardiff and Swansea.

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55 PRO, Lab 10/367, RWE 11.1.41.

56 Ibid., RWE 8.2.41.

57 Ibid.

In February, the Regional Controller reported that Communist members of the SWMF were faring badly as a result of their open support of the Convention: "In Lodge elections for officers for the coming year Communist members appear to be experiencing a number of defeats and they have been most unsuccessful in their effort to persuade lodges to protest against the banning of the Daily Worker."<sup>58</sup>

The adherence of the miners' M.P.s, and of Labour M.P.s as a whole, to the Government's line on the People's Convention was, as would be expected, even more faithful than that of the majority of constituency branch members. When, for example, Aneurin Bevan opposed the ban on the Daily Worker there were just seven other Labour members who dared vote with him against the whips.<sup>59</sup> He vilified the Labour Party's prescription of Convention supporters as being indicative of the backward conservatism of many of the Party's leaders. He accused them of being happy to "accept the obligation of defending the politics of the Tory majority in the Government."<sup>60</sup>

Inside the SWMF, the Communists responded to the proscription order by intensifying their efforts to persuade delegate conferences to accept the broad aims of the Convention. Much publicity was given to a Communist proposal at the SWMF Annual Conference which attacked the "proscribing" policy of the Labour Party and the TUC and which attempted to persuade the Federation to act in defiance of the proscriptions. It was

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58 Ibid.

59 M. Foot, op.cit., pp.325-326.

60 Ibid., p.331.

accompanied by a Labourite proposal that Horner and all other pro-Convention officers be asked to resign.

At the conference itself, Horner was returned unopposed as President. In his address, he concentrated his attack upon the continuing low level of wages in the industry and demanded from the employers and Government a guaranteed working week and minimum wage. Only by implementing these demands, he argued, would it be possible to prevent the potentially disastrous drift of miners away from the industry towards better paid alternative work. With his genius for sensing and articulating the moods of the coalfield, he succeeded in diverting possible criticism of his war line by vigorously challenging recent public allegations that the miners were not pulling their weight in the battle for production. Only a few days previous to the conference, for instance, Frank Hodges, ex-miners' leader-turned-company director, had attacked the "idleness" of miners who were, as he put it, "habitual absentees".<sup>61</sup> Horner used the allegation as a vehicle for pushing forward the most popular of coalfield demands - that which advocated nationalization of the coal industry. Only such a measure, he argued, "could really solve the problems now affecting the industry." With the delegates now solidly behind him, he switched his attack to the prevailing scarcity of certain foodstuffs essential to miners. It was this scarcity, he argued,

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<sup>61</sup> C.G., 4.4.41.

which was the real cause of the much-publicised decline in output-per-manshift. The old inequalities and injustices were there in wartime as they had been in peacetime. The working class, he argued, should no longer tolerate the "disparity between supplies to the rich and to the poor..."<sup>62</sup>

By this vehement enunciation of genuine and widespread grievances, Horner succeeded once again in diverting the arrows of those who would bring him down. He knew his audience too well to make the mistake of assuming that his resignation would automatically be demanded on the grounds of his presumed lack of loyalty to the government of the day. It was an audience which undoubtedly shared many of his (patently justifiable) suspicions of a Government and Parliament which contained (as did Churchill's) such a rump of "Guilty Men"<sup>63</sup>. Indeed, few present at the conference could conceivably have been naive enough to assume that wartime "national unity" automatically signalled an end to profiteering and exploitation by the coalowners. Horner articulated his audience's suspicion and mistrust and emerged from the conference unscathed. Like Bevan, he survived and prospered because his finger was never far from the coalfield's pulse.

This was his greatest strength as a trade union leader. Least of all of his generation did he lose the ability to temper

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62 SWMF Conference Report, Presidential Address, 1941.

63 i.e. "Munich-ites" or members of what Angus Calder refers to as the "Old Gang".

the grand gestures of high union office with those humbler, but no less significant touches by which a leader indicates his sensitivity to even the smallest of specific branch problems. He understood, for instance, the importance to his members of the proper maintenance of their pit "customs" - a task which, in wartime, was made all the more difficult for them by the super-abundance of calls for patriotic self-sacrifice.

Pit "customs" had survived the rigorous challenge to which they had been subjected during the depressed 1930s rather more successfully in the anthracite pits than in those of the steam and bituminous areas - largely, of course, because the more consistent demand for anthracite had ensured higher levels of employment and stronger Federation branches in anthracite collieries than in those producing steam and bituminous coals.<sup>64</sup> It was, consequently,

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64 See W.J. Anthony-Jones, "Labour Relations in the South Wales Coal Mining Industry, December 1926 - September 1939". Unpublished thesis, Aberystwyth 1959, esp. pp.84-85 and statistical Appendix E, Table 1: "The salient feature ... is the concentration of strikes in the Anthracite sector, which possessed only one-sixth of the collieries of the coalfield and provided employment for about one-sixth of the total labour force. Six of the seven collieries which experienced more than 20 strikes each, were located in this area; of the strikes resulting in a complete cessation of work at a colliery, one half took place in the Anthracite sector as did one-third of the partial colliery stoppages of the coalfield ... the increasing demand for the high quality Anthracite coal of the locality prompted the managements to accede to excessive demands for allowances and privileges. When the Amalgamated Anthracite Combine later acquired these undertakings and attempted to eliminate the non-economic working practices there was continual strife. Such was the highly developed sense of solidarity in the locality, however, that an unresolved dispute at one frequently resulted in strikes at (other) collieries."



in the anthracite mines that the most publicised and controversial "customs" disputes took place from 1939 onwards. The disputes themselves ranged from very minor protests involving a few individuals to ones involving simultaneous actions by pit workforces right across the coalfield. The changing responses which they provoked from members of the SWMF Executive closely parallel the Executive's own changing attitude towards its relationship with management and government. This is clearly displayed, for instance, in the ongoing dispute which surrounded the Neath "Fair Day" custom. Four months after the declaration of war, the presiding magistrate at Neath County Court awarded to local miners one of the very few favourable legal judgements concerning "customs" and "practice" that were to be awarded to South Wales miners between 1939 and 1946. A prosecution had been brought against the representatives of 4,000 of their employees by the "C.L. Clay" and Amalgamated Anthracite coal companies alleging that the men had broken their contracts by absenting themselves from work on the annual Neath Fair Day. The employees argued that they had always availed themselves of a holiday on that date by custom and several witnesses gave evidence to the effect that, although they had worked the pits of the area for over 50 years, never once had they worked on Neath Fair Day.<sup>65</sup>

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65 C.G., 21.12.39.

The prosecution alleged that, since the Neath Fair Day "holiday" was not included as a specific item in the Joint Conciliation Board Agreement, it constituted a restrictive practice and that the men were therefore guilty of wilful and avoidable absenteeism. Such a line of argument indicates quite clearly that this was a test case, for the companies' officials would have known full well that any document or joint agreement which attempted to include within its text even a small proportion of pit customs and practices then in existence would, perforce, have been so large and<sup>d</sup> complex as to be completely unmanageable.

Many pit customs, such as that of the Neath Fair Day "holiday", were never written down; they became enshrined as common "practice" - sometimes as a result of a previous trial of strength, sometimes upon mutual agreement and sometimes as an act of generosity on the part of the coalowner. Thus, in the same week as the Neath hearing, the Amalgamated Anthracite company distributed 20 tons of coal to the unemployed of Cwmmamman as a "Christmastide custom"<sup>66</sup> - a gesture which was designed, presumably, to improve the image of the company which had done such a great deal to relieve "overmanning" in the pits of the area.

Like Powell Duffryn, Amalgamated Anthracite held a reputation as a "rationalizing" employer. It was linked, directorially, with the C.L. Clay company and with Powell Duffryn through members of

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66 Ibid.

the ubiquitous Llewellyn family.<sup>67</sup> Like P.D.s, it regarded events such as the Neath Fair Day "holiday" as constituting little more than wilful impediments to "rationalized" production. The Neath Fair Day "impediment" was merely a little more institutionalized than others which Amalgamated Anthracite had encountered right across the coalfield. Just five months before the Neath case was heard, for instance, the Chairman of Amalgamated Anthracite, F.A. Szarvasy, informed his company's shareholders that mining conditions in the anthracite area were, unfortunately, ill-suited to many of the new production techniques available :

"Anthracite seams are shallower and more irregular than those of the rest of the coalfield," he complained and added that this position was exacerbated by the fact that "ingrained customs amongst their (i.e. the A.A.'s) miners were more restrictive than in the rest of the coalfields." He alleged that the miners "had not yet fully faced up to the fact that modern methods of mining and a more extensive use of machinery were essential to success," and he implied that until they did so it was impossible to argue that their wages were being "honestly earned."<sup>68</sup>

His Neath Valley employees argued that the "holiday", as a long-standing custom, was protected by the Joint Conciliation Agreement. This had been Horner's line of defence during the Bwllfa and Nantmelyn disputes cited above. (see Chapter 3). He had alleged that, since there was an absence of any clause in the Agreement specifying that customs were automatically

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<sup>67</sup> See Appendix Two, pp.

<sup>68</sup> C.G., 7.7.39.

declared null and void upon a change of colliery ownership, it was therefore the case that previous custom and practice should continue in the same way as previously agreed price lists continued - unless, of course, they were freely re-negotiated by men and management.<sup>69</sup>

The Neath magistrates found in favour of the men and against the company. The latter lodged notice of appeal and the case came before Lord Justice Slesser in February 1940. Without calling a counsel for the respondents (i.e. the miners) judgement was once more given against the company, Lord Justice Slesser ruling that the practice of not working on Neath Fair Day "contained the ingredients for the establishment of a particular custom or usage ... the holiday was well known to owners and men and it was reasonable."<sup>70</sup> This was now, however, the end of the matter. The Lord Justice's ruling was viewed with equanimity by the Executive of the SWMF in February 1940; the war was still in its "phoney" stage and, as we have seen, the most dynamic and influential member of the executive, Horner, was still firmly, if grudgingly, ensconced in his "Imperialist War" position. The Federation was not about to launch itself on a campaign of intense self-examination and heart-searching over the question of whether or not its members should forfeit their long-cherished pit customs for the sake of increased productivity and company profits. That was an experience which was to be denied them until the invasion of the Soviet Union some 17 months later.

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<sup>69</sup> See Chapter Three, above.

<sup>70</sup> Neath Guardian, 10.2.40.

Flushed with the success of their legal triumph, the Vale of Neath miners duly took their next Fair Day holiday on the traditional date in the second week of September 1940 - at the height of the "third phase" of the Battle of Britain. But any anger which their action might have sparked off in the minds of more obviously "patriotic" contemporaries must have been allayed somewhat by a glance at the statistics of supply and demand as they affected the South Wales coal industry in the Autumn of 1940. Britain may well have been reeling under an onslaught of German bombs, but, as we have seen, she was definitely not short of Welsh coal. With upwards of 13,000 men rendered idle by the collapse of the French market and the prolonged breakdown in rail services between South Wales and England, a voluntary holiday by 4,000 men might justifiably have been interpreted as an exemplary and altruistic act, - an easing of their employer's "burden" of having to find work for them.

Outraged patriots were forced to wait until the Autumn of 1941 before they felt completely free to castigate the miners of the Neath Valley for indulging in restrictive practices. By that date, the Government was openly expressing great concern about the country's dwindling coal supplies - a concern which, since the invasion of the Soviet Union two months earlier, was now wholly shared by Horner and the full SWMF Executive. The line of the CPGB had swung back to one of unconditional support for the war effort and the hearts of patriots throughout the land must, no doubt, have been warmed by the news that Horner himself had volunteered his services in an attempt to persuade the would-be

holiday-makers to forego their ancient prerogative and to dig instead for an allied victory - now that the nature of the war had once more changed.<sup>71</sup>

Amalgamated Anthracite's General Manager, M.H. Llewellyn, appealed to the men on behalf of the company's board of directors to "forego this holiday in the interests of production as they were bound to ship as much anthracite as possible to Canada before the end of October."<sup>72</sup> To do otherwise, he warned them, would be to risk the capture of that market by American companies.

The Mines Department of the Government sought to bring the influence of the Miners' Federation Executive to bear on the position and Horner duly presented to the men's leaders a proposed compromise. All was to no avail; the holiday was taken.

The intransigence displayed by the Vale of Neath miners reflected the mood of general suspicion and disgruntlement which pervaded the coalfield during the Summer of 1941. A year earlier the SWMF Executive had, after a period of confusion and vacillation, been successful in persuading its members to forego their Summer holidays for the sake of increased war production, but the coalfield's workforce rejected a similar request in 1941. Horner attempted to formulate a compromise and offered, instead, to negotiate staggered holidays for his members. This, too, was rejected at a conference of lodge delegates on the grounds that it entailed a reduction in the overall length of the holidays to which the men were entitled. The Executive Council of the SWMF

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71 Ibid., 13.9.41.

72 PRO., Lab 10/367.

had been "unanimous" in recommending such a compromise but, obeying the mandate of their members, they informed the owners that the holidays would be taken in August Bank Holiday Week.<sup>73</sup>

The Owners, not unnaturally, opposed this decision but their opposition was tempered by the news that the miners, after a good deal of acrimonious debate, had agreed to maintain coal cutting on Sunday night shifts.<sup>74</sup>

In July, the coalfield's workforce had rejected Sunday night coalfilling but in August they voted acceptance of the practice by 58,662 votes to 34,836. The change of mind had resulted from an appeal by Horner to a special delegate conference recommending acceptance on the grounds that such a move would constitute the "greatest single wage increase ever secured in South Wales or any other coalfield."<sup>75</sup> The Sunday shift, he informed the delegates, "need not be a production shift, just so long as there are enough men there to allow men not to be turned back on Monday morning."<sup>76</sup> The proposed agreement meant an increase of about 30% to day wage and of 30½% to piece workers for Sunday night working.<sup>77</sup>

As late as December 1939, members of the SWMF Executive Council had been advocating shorter weekday working shifts and the Anthracite area of the Federation had been in the forefront of the drive to secure a shorter Saturday shift.<sup>78</sup> The Powell

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73 C.G., 25.7.41.

74 Ibid., 1.8.41.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid., 8.12.39.

Duffryn Combine Committee in May 1940 had resolved to use every means possible to prevent coal being filled in P.D. mines on Sunday nights and they were backed in their action by the SWMF Executive who decided to advise their lodge committee members to offer "strenuous opposition" to the practice.<sup>79</sup>

The debate over working hours had been given an extra fillip during the late Spring of 1940 by the national strike of coalminers in Australia during April and May of that year. The announcement by the Australian P.M., Menzies, that the strike was to be broken through the introduction of militarily protected "voluntary" labour coincided with the Welsh employers' demand for Sunday coal filling. The Australian miners were demanding a 40 hour week and their strike had totally disrupted the industrial life of the Dominion. The comparative "moderation" of the British miners' leaders displayed itself in stark contrast to this action. One newspaper observed that, "To their credit, the British miners' leaders have relegated such claims (as that of the Australians) to the post-war Elysium, even if they are unwilling to go as far as their French colleagues or their German adversaries."<sup>80</sup>

During May 1940, however, the SWMF Executive gave notice to the effect that, although they were prepared to wait for Elysium they were not prepared to forego their annual holiday from Hades. They rejected a quite startling proposal from the owners which

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79 Ibid., 10.5.40.

80 Ibid.



offered the miners payment of agreed holiday money on top of their earnings if they worked their holiday week. The SWMF Executive pressed on with their condemnation of Sunday coal filling.<sup>81</sup>

The Federation was by no means solidly united on these issues, however. It was obvious, from the attention which the Executive devoted to the subject, that Sunday coal filling was widespread. Likewise, there was undoubtedly widespread support for the "sacrificing" of holidays: on the 25th of May, for instance, the Regional Industrial Relations Officer reported that, "In the West Wales area 2,000 miners have offered to forego their week's holiday this year, in spite of the decision of the National Executive Council of the SWMF ... to reject a proposal by the Employers that the holiday should be waived in order to increase production."<sup>82</sup>

By early June, pressure was mounting on the SWMF Executive to enter into closer co-operation with the Owners and Government in order that a concerted effort be made to solve the problem of underproduction. In the first week of June important steps were taken by the Executive and the owners to ensure "uninterrupted continuity of employment during the period of the war," and, in co-operation with Lord Portal and the Coal Production Council, to "increase ... production to meet the exigencies of the present

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81 SWMF Executive Minutes, 15.5.40.

82 PRO, Lab 10/366, RWE 25.5.40.

grave emergency."<sup>83</sup> A conference of SWMF Lodge officers delegated to Horner full power to deal with disputes "to the point of finality" where there was evidence that existing arbitration machinery had not been effective. Similar powers were conferred by the Owners' Association upon Sir Evan Williams who, with the authority of the Association, delegated those powers to Iestyn Williams. This arrangement was to apply for the duration of the war with the proviso that the status quo was to be reverted to after the war by the employers or workmen if they so desired.<sup>84</sup>

At a meeting of the South Wales Joint Committee of the Coal Production Council at Cardiff on June 4th 1940, representatives of workmen and owners drew up a list of proposals for boosting production. The points agreed upon included one which announced that, henceforth, "The management and Workmen's committee (would) be responsible for the adjustment in the disposition of jobs particularly in regard to the employment of labour which has a limited efficiency value."<sup>85</sup>

This constituted a clear recognition by the owners of the importance to Federation members of the maintenance of the Seniority Rule within the pits. It also flatteringly implied that Federation members were, henceforth, to participate in decision-making processes which formerly had been the prerogative of management.

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83 Western Mail, 5.6.40.

84 C.G., 7.6.40.

85 Coal Production Council Minutes, SWMF Files, University College Swansea.

Such statements of goodwill and co-operation promoted a sizeable wave of co-operative gestures from even the most suspicious groupings of miners. On June 8th 1940, for instance, the Amalgamated Anthracite Combine Committee brought mandates from lodges unanimously accepting the recommendations of the Joint Consultative Committee of the Working of Collieries.<sup>86</sup> The recommendations had urged Amalgamated Anthracite to carry out technical re-organisation agreed upon by the joint investigators and suggested strongly that operations should continue at uneconomic collieries pending the re-deployment to other mines of men employed at such collieries whenever possible.<sup>87</sup>

If, as the combine committee hoped, the company accepted these proposals, then it was agreed that workmen would be urged to refer all disputes to their own lodge representatives for settlement and to carry on working pending the outcome of negotiations. All unsettled disputes were to be referred to a monthly joint meeting at Swansea which would act henceforward as a clearing house for all disputes arising at Amalgamated Anthracite Collieries.<sup>88</sup>

This was, in many ways, the end of the first stage in the development of the reconstituted combine committees. Instead of uniting the widespread lodges of the combine companies' pits in

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86 Amalgamated Anthracite Combine Committee Minutes, SWMF Files, University College Swansea.

87 C.G., 14.6.40.

88 Ibid. Also Amalgamated Anthracite Combine Committee Minutes, SWMF Files, University College Swansea.

order to meet the challenge presented by "multi-communal" managerial techniques,<sup>89</sup> the workmen's committees were now uniting to co-operate with their managers. This development reflected the general mood of the coalfield during the critical Summer and Autumn of 1940. In terms of strike statistics it was a period of quite startling peace when compared with the previous decade or so. On June 15th the Federations' Executive agreed to institute joint efforts at each of the coalfield's pits to "bring about a reduction of avoidable absenteeism"<sup>90</sup> and to examine "recent settlements for the payment of increased cutting prices to be obtained as the result of cleaner filling of coal."<sup>91</sup> In doing so, the Executive implicitly recognised the validity of the employers' claims that coal shortages and increased sale prices were the direct result of deliberate absenteeism and of the wholesale filling of "dirty coal" by pieceworkers at the face. This was, in many ways, a remarkable departure from the Federation's previous line concerning these contentious issues.

The Coalowners' allegations of widespread absenteeism had always been regarded by the Federation as an attempt to sidetrack the fundamental problems presented by the need for industrial reorganisation. It was well known that the Coalowners had made a good deal of political capital out of the publicity devoted to this topic by the press. The Federation had argued, justifiably,

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89 See above, Chapter One.

90 C.G., 21.6.40. See below, Chapter 8, Section 2.

91 Ibid.

that "avoidable" absenteeism was no higher in the coal industry than other industries and that the high rate of shifts lost through all causes (which was higher in mining than in any other industry) was due to the nature of mining itself, with its extremely high accident rate, its working conditions and the heavy tasks which were required of miners.<sup>92</sup>

After June, 1940, however, the "small minority" of "hard core" absenteeists became fair game for Federation criticism and formed part of the staple diet of management-worker tribunals at individual pits. The Owners were quick to take advantage of the Federation's new "line" and didn't hesitate to tar the Neath Fair Day holidaymakers, for example, with the same brush as that which they used to blacken the image of all other absenteeists. They were aided by Will Lawther's stirring appeal for increased productivity which he released in the third week of June 1940. He appealed to miners to ensure that there was "constant attendance at work and the utmost amount of coal that can be obtained when they are there."<sup>93</sup>

He reminded his members of the way in which Hitler had brought "tragedy and disaster" to miners in Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg and France and of the murder by the Nazis of the President of the Miners International, Fritz Husemann whose only crime, declared Lawther, had been that he had kept intact the German Miners' Union. "Coal is more valuable than gold in today's conflict", he continued, "We know what a wonderful

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92 See Margot Heinemann, op.cit., p.27.

93 C.G., 28.6.40.

response there has been. It must be kept up. There is no question of two different sides in industry today. Owners of pits, miners and officials are on one side. Hitler is on the other."<sup>94</sup> He ended by emphasising that it was of critical importance that "miners cannot and will not allow anything to stand in the way of having more coal."<sup>95</sup>

Reinforcing the Lawther appeal, the SWMF Executive forcefully reminded its members that "No stints or restriction of output were to be practiced" at any colliery and on 6th July a special meeting of SWMF delegates in Cardiff announced that a decision had been reached to forego holidays for that year "... in view of the ... uncertain position."<sup>96</sup>

The ruling forbidding "restriction of output" was welcomed by the Owners as constituting an extremely timely piece of moral propaganda. No longer, they reasoned, would the public regard their attempts to eradicate coalfield customs and practices with quite the same degree of suspicion as had been the case during the 1930s. Consequently, the Owners stood firm on the prosecutions, for example, of three Nine Mile Point miners accused of breach of contract as a result of returning home and not going onto the night shift after hearing of the death of one of their mates on the afternoon shift.<sup>97</sup>

The "hard-line" adopted by the Owners on this sensitive issue was implicitly condoned five months later by the Amalgamated Anthracite combine committee which drew up an agreement with the

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94 Ibid..

95 Ibid.

96 SWMF Executive Committee minutes, 6.7.40.

97 C.G., 24.5.40. The three men were fined up to £4 each.

employers specifying that, in future, only a percentage of men from any pit would be allowed time off to attend the funeral of comrades who had died at work.<sup>98</sup> This was a remarkable change of heart on the part of the combine committee members - especially when one considers the quite considerable publicity given to the rise in accident rates which had occurred in Welsh pits since the outbreak of war.<sup>99</sup> The Minister of Mines, David Grenfell, for instance, informed a Swansea audience on September 19th 1940, that "In these last 14 months the number of men killed in the mines of South Wales was greater than the number killed by enemy action in the whole of Wales."<sup>100</sup>

There were two, linked, reasons for this "change of heart". The first was, of course, the spirit of patriotism which pervaded the country during the Summer and Autumn of 1940. The second was, quite simply, that the miners were heeding the pleas of Lawther and the MFGB/Labour Party leadership to translate this "patriotism" into increased production. Momentarily, the rank and file of the South Wales coal industry found itself more in sympathy with the thoughts of Will Lawther than with those of Horner. This was both Horner's and the CPGB's nadir of popularity on the coalfield. The great majority of the Federation's membership appears to have responded positively to Lawther's appeal (made at the MFGB Annual Conference in July) for a "resolute

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98 Ibid., 25.10.40.

99 See Grenfell's report to the MFGB Conference : Annual Conference Report, July 1940.

100 Western Mail, 19.10.40.

support of the conduct of the war, which", he argued, "would be the only attitude consistent with the miners' declaration of policy ever since the menace of Nazism had appeared. Never were there more insistent, consistent and persistent protagonists in the call for resistance to the menace than the British miners.", claimed Lawther. "In plain words, they expressed their disgust and deprecated the collaboration of certain of their countrymen with Ribbentrop and his like."<sup>101</sup>

Lawther's allusions to the role of Communists like Horner were designed to tear a hole in what he considered to be a veil of Communist duplicity and equivocation regarding the patriotic effort to raise production "for victory". "... what was a crime in London", he argued, "did not become a virtue when it is performed in Moscow ", and he contrasted what he portrayed as the Fifth Columnism of the Communists alongside the vision of patriotic glory which he saw enshrined in the task now at hand: "It was given to us as a privilege and an honour seldom offered to a nation in the history of mankind to uphold the banner of human liberty and freedom."<sup>102</sup>

But although it was true that the great bulk of the South Wales workforce refrained, to a remarkable degree during the Summer and Autumn of 1940, from practicing many of the restrictive measures common during the previous decade, nevertheless, a number of grievances - some longstanding, some new - succeeded in

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101 MFGB Annual Conference Minutes, July 1940.

102 Ibid.



blotting an otherwise exemplary industrial relations report. None of these grievances manifested itself in a full-blown or costly strike, but all of them provided sufficient evidence to remind the mining workforce that very little had changed in the fundamental relationships existing between miners and Owners and miners and Government during the first two years of the war.

The grievances were those which Horner had articulated at the SWMF Conference in April 1940. They concerned money, food, absenteeism and compulsory direction of labour and they were to remain major points of dispute to the end of the war and beyond.

Horner's handling of these questions did not, however, remain constant. After the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 he expressed a new urgency in his efforts and demands for solutions. At the 1942 SWMF Annual Conference he outlined to lodge delegates the reasons for his change of attitude:

"A year ago," he declared, "the conflict between nations was limited in its scope and character. Since then it has spread and enveloped the whole world. Events have demonstrated that peace is indivisible, and that the only alternative to world peace is total world war." 103

He refrained from lingering on passages of patriotic generalities and set before the delegates his analysis of the new situation as it affected coal-mining:

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103 SWMF Annual Conference Report, "Presidential Address", p.3.

"The effects and the extension of hostilities have been experienced in a greater or lesser degree in every phase of modern existence, and especially in industry. The successful conduct of modern war, with its high degree of mechanisation, tends more and more to become the problem of obtaining greater quantities of materials of superior quality to those possessed by the enemy.

In Great Britain the coal industry is the basis upon which the whole of the armament industry has been constructed. Without adequate supplies of coal the war industry could not be carried on. A serious shortage of fuel, resulting in lack of protection against cold and darkness, would demoralise the civil population. Failure to provide adequate supplies of coal could lead to the total collapse of the nation's war effort and consequent defeat."<sup>104</sup>

The message was quite clear: practices which had been acceptable, or even downright desirable, to the working class in times of peace were unacceptable in times of "total war". He might have added, in the light of the CPGB's about-turn in its analysis of the nature of the hostilities, that "total war" allowed leaders like himself to indulge in displays of political gymnastics.

His new enthusiasm for the war effort reflected, of course, the new enthusiasm displayed by the CPGB. The acting General Secretary of the Party, Willie Gallagher, explained to reporters the logic of his Executive's about-turn shortly after the commencement of the German invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22nd 1941:

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

"I admit we have called this "a monstrous Imperialist War", but when there is an attack against the vanguard of the working class, the working classes in every country must unite." 105

The Communist Party, he declared, was ready and willing to discuss with members of the Labour or "any other party ... measures to ensure co-operation, and to inaugurate a big drive in the factories." The situation had now so changed, he added that "it was not necessary to put the campaign for a "people's peace" in the forefront."<sup>106</sup>

Harry Pollitt emphasised the CPGB's intention to raise productivity and overall production and announced that "he at least" was out to "fight the war to a finish":

"We must go on increasing our production and we must throw all our weight into the fight so that we shall batter hell out of Hitler and Fascism." 107

The former editor of the Daily Worker, William Rust, in a letter to the newspapers, declared that he and Professor Haldane were "quite prepared to give personal assurances to the Government ... that the Daily Worker, if allowed to re-appear, will vigorously campaign in the factories in order to achieve the maximum production for victory and to bring about the widest possible unity in the fight to defeat and crush the Nazis."<sup>108</sup>

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105 Daily Telegraph, 27.6.41.

106 The Times, 27.6.41.

107 News Chronicle, 27.6.41.

108 Ibid., 7.7.41.

Horner, for his part, invited Admiral Sir Edward Evans to address a conference of lodge delegates at Cardiff on the subject of the nation's need for more coal. Horner fully endorsed, on the behalf of the Federation, the Admiral's call for a "pick and shovel Blitzkreig ... to help beat Hitler".<sup>109</sup> He persuaded the miners to accept a Sunday coal-cutting shift and was only narrowly defeated in his attempt to convince his membership that they should forego their annual holidays as they had done the previous Summer.<sup>110</sup>

The political nature of the CPGB's "about-turn" manifested itself quite clearly in the campaign which was launched across the coalfield during late August 1941, to "foster Anglo-Soviet solidarity."<sup>111</sup> Miners' leaders representing some 110,000 men met with their M.P.s in Cardiff to discuss the details of the campaign. It was agreed that all costs should be met by the SWMF Central Fund.<sup>112</sup> From this point onwards, the needs and the achievements of the Red Army were to occupy a central place in the iconography of the anti-Nazi struggle. The image of the Soviet infantryman would, time and again, be thrust before the eyes of those who would strike or go-slow without official sanction. Horner conjured it up for the benefit of his audience at the 1942 SWMF Annual Conference:

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109 C.G., 11.7.41.

110 See above, p.

111 C.G., 29.8.41.

112 Ibid.

"Whilst we proudly applaud the vast achievements of the people of the USSR, whilst we are loud in our praises of their ability to overcome all obstacles, even at the cost of their own lives, we must understand that we, too, must be ready to face similar tasks with the same spirit of self-sacrifice as allies fighting with them in a common struggle." 113

He did not, however, blandly ignore the contradictions inherent in his demands. Nationalisation of the coal industry had not been achieved. The Coalowners were still reaping the benefits of any increase in production and profits which might accrue from the miners' efforts. Far from ignoring these facts, he held them up before his audience and used them unashamedly as proof of the astounding value to the Russians of their socialism - as opposed to the capitalist millstone which continued to hang around the necks of the British working class:

"It is true that they (the Russians) are fighting to preserve their own socialist way of life which they have established in their great country and that this nerves and strengthens them to sacrifice and fight in an unprecedented fashion.

It is equally true that we live in a capitalist country in which private ownership still permits the exploitation of our class by another class, and that we have a Government which represents a Class System. Yet, notwithstanding these two undeniable facts, I now state that we are serving the cause of Socialism by placing our full energies at the disposal of our Government which is organising the struggle against Fascism.

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113 SWMF Annual Conference Report, "Presidential Address", p.11.

"To collaborate with our Government so long as it earnestly fights against this menace, is not to deny the class struggle ...

In the interests of all we cherish and for the future of all mankind, let us readily shoulder the burdens arising from the war, ensuring that these burdens are borne equally by all sections of the community.

If nursing our past grievances, which are many, militates against the maximum effort to win this war, forget them. If any sections of the community prejudices the war effort by anxiety about their vested interests, they must be ruthlessly dealt with." 114

The Neath Fair Day holidaymakers appeared, to the coalowners at least, to constitute just such a "section of the community"; but to deal with them "ruthlessly", the owners and Federation executive would have found themselves obliged to close their eyes to the objective realities of coalmining in the Neath Valley in the later Summer of 1941. The miners and their families were quite obviously more than entitled to their holiday. Like most other British miners, they considered themselves lacking in proper food and wages incentives. Wartime accident rates had soared and working conditions remained, at best, static. The dangers of mining continued to make their presence felt: 15 men and boys died in an explosion at Rhigos No. 4 drift just over a month before the Neath Fair Day was due to take place.<sup>115</sup> They were early additions to a death toll in the nation's pits of

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114 Ibid.

115 Details in C.G., 18.7.41. and Aberdare Leader, 18.7.41.

476 men and boys killed in the 26 weeks ending June 28th,  
1,470 had been seriously injured during the same period.<sup>116</sup>  
It was one thing to issue patriotic calls for increased  
productivity and to threaten those who did not respond with  
"ruthless" retribution but quite another to enforce such  
threats upon workers who, daily, courted death and injury for  
wages which compared unfavourably with those earned by wives,  
daughters and girlfriends employed at nearby ordnance factories.  
Horner understood this better than most; he did not join the  
herd which bayed at the Vale of Neath miners to forego their  
customary holiday. His appeal to them was muted and sober,  
and when it failed he was among the first to acknowledge the justice  
of their actions - despite his Party's line of working to ensure  
unequivocal support for the Government's production drives.  
The reasons for his actions are not difficult to ascertain.  
The Rhigos drifts had long been amongst the most productive of  
anthracite mines; (as had the other Vale of Neath collieries<sup>117</sup>)  
its record of industrial relations had been, by South Wales  
standards, exemplary<sup>118</sup> and, like the other Vale of Neath  
collieries, the Rhigos drifts had retained an efficient and  
well-organised Federation lodge.<sup>119</sup> To deny the workforce of  
such a colliery continuance of traditional and highly-valued  
customs would have served little useful purpose and may well have  
served, on the contrary, to embitter the workforce and render  
useless any future pleas for increased productivity.

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116 C.G., 25.7.41.

117 See page 246.

118 See W.J. Anthony Jones, op.cit., Appendix E, Table 1.

119 Recording with David Francis, April 1978, Cardiff.

Footnote 117

There being no accurate comprehensive output/employment figures available for the South Wales pits from 1939-41, I have taken the figures for the year 1946 which nevertheless provide a rough guide to the performance of the pits in question. The following list contains the eleven mines on the anthracite field producing over 120,000 tons per annum in 1946:

(1939 employment figures where available)

<u>Mine</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Nos Employed</u>		<u>Approx Annual</u>	<u>Owners</u>
		<u>1946</u>	<u>1939</u>	<u>Tonnage</u>	
Pentremawr	Pontyberem	660	(1,000)	200,000	A.A.
*Rhigos	V.N.Glynneath-Hirwaun	720		200,000	Clay & Co.
Cefn Coed	Crynant	790	( 240)	180,000	A.A.
*Aberpergwm	V.N.Glynneath	775		170,000	A.A.
Onllwyn No.3	Onllwyn	646	(1,200)	165,000	Evans Bevan
Cwmgwrach	V.N.Glynneath	930		150,000	C&E Colls.
Mountain	Gorseinon	535	( 680)	135,000	Swansea Navig.
Seven Sisters	Seven Sisters	829	(1,100)	125,000	Evans Bevan
*Rock	V.N.Glynneath	687		120,000	A.A.
Great Mountain	Tumble	717	(1,300)	120,000	A.A.
Steer	Gwau- <del>n</del> -cae-gurwen	788	( 570)	120,000	A.A.

Figures taken from Colliery Year Book and Coal Trades Directory, 1947

\* Mines cited in prosecution      1939 Figures from J. Anthony Jones  
V.N. Vale of Neath Mines          op.cit., Table 2.



Horner trod very carefully. He was subject to a great deal of pressure urging him to countenance no wilful impediment to production - no matter how justified it might appear in terms of coalfield traditions. The national newspapers were full of accounts of the sacrifices made by working men and women in aid of the Red Army.<sup>120</sup> He was a vulnerable figure. Will Lawther, the Miners' president, had attacked him repeatedly before the Nazi invasion of Russia for his reticence to openly advocate unequivocal support for the war effort. His frenetic propagandising activities after June 1941 could be interpreted as an attempt by him to correct his patriotic image.

In August, he took part in a BBC radio broadcast with Lawther and other prominent miners' leaders appealing to "patriotic ex-miners" to return to the nation's mines and help ease the industry's manpower shortage problem.<sup>121</sup> In September, he took a leading part in the

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120 The two following are typical examples, they appeared in the Daily Express during September 1941, the same month as the Neath Fair Day holiday:

"After M. Maisky had told workers at a tank factory yesterday, 'We will go on fighting to the end until our enemy is crushed for ever', the works manager mounted a tank and asked the men, 'What is your answer?'"

"More tanks", they chorused.

"Then go to it", he replied, and they immediately swarmed back to their jobs.

"An 'Aid to Russia' plea helped to settle a strike in Glasgow yesterday. Several hundred men at an engineering works, who came out on Saturday, listened to an appeal to return to work immediately to get Aid-for-Russia production into full swing and agreed to do so." (both appeared 23.9.41.).

121 C.G., 29.8.41.

organisation of the first Coal Production Conference to be held in South Wales. Amongst the leading speakers was Sir Evan Williams, the President of the South Wales Mineowners' Association, who described the Conference as an "unique" and welcome event: "It was the first occasion," he said, "that mineowners and men had been on the same platform", and he reminded his audience that the coalfield's "target production" had not yet been reached. "That it should be reached", he argued, "was a sacred obligation ... to see that Russia was not let down in her magnificent struggle", and he was sure that everyone at the Conference would become a "missionary for production."<sup>122</sup>

Spurred on, no doubt, by Sir Evan's remarkable display of forgive and forget, (Sir Evan would not easily have forgotten his own allegations of "Russian Gold" made during the Lockout of 1926) Horner announced that "The common danger facing owners, managers and workers is the magnet that draws all together."<sup>123</sup> "Never," he continued, "had conditions been so menacing for colliery managers and workmen. If we are beaten in this war, life as many of the miners knew it under the "means test" would be comparative luxury."<sup>124</sup>

Smaller versions of the Coal Production Council were held in pits right accross the coalfield. In October, for example, the managers and employees of Aberpergwm and Rock collieries (two of the collieries cited in the Neath Fair Day hearing) held a joint meeting to discuss methods of increasing production. The Amalgamated

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122 Ibid., 19.9.41.

123 "World News and Views", 11.9.41.

124 C.G., 19.9.41.

Anthracite Company's agent for the mines, D.E. Watkins, advocated that there should be "absolute co-operation of all sections of personnel" and that this should be offered "with the spirit of doing one's best for the sake of the country". All sides, he argued, should work "in a spirit of mutual confidence" and the best way of achieving this, he claimed, was by bringing absenteeism down to the absolute minimum: "At the present time", he declared, "there is a noticeable apathy amongst the workmen. This must stop and any workman or official who observes anyone not pulling his weight should report the matter to the pit committee immediately."<sup>125</sup>

Watkins's advocacy of mutual spying-for-production was heard by the Glynneath assembly without interruption, for the mood of the meeting was, it seems, most sympathetic to such proposals: "Many patriotic words were spoken pleading for increased production", reported the local newspaper. The outcome, though highly optimistic, was predictably vague: "After a thorough discussion it was resolved that each group of workmen should foregather as soon as possible to formulate suggestions for improvement in output."<sup>126</sup>

The suggestions may or may not have been forthcoming but what is certain is that this mood of optimism and co-operation had soured sufficiently by the following May to allow the first strike to occur at the Aberpergwm and Rock collieries since the

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125 Neath Guardian, 24.10.41.

126 Ibid.

outbreak of war. Ironically enough, it was provoked by disciplinary action threatened against a pit-boy by the Pit Production Committee - the body set up to instigate increased co-operation between men and management at production level.<sup>127</sup>

Even as the historic Coal Production Conference had proceeded in Cardiff to express its patriotic intention to nurture co-operation, a courtroom wrangle in Ammanford some forty-five miles to the northwest served to remind the coalfield, if it needed reminding, that there still was no such thing as the one, big, united industrial army to which speaker after speaker referred. There continued to exist two mutually suspicious camps : that of the coalowners and that of the coalworkers.

Like the Neath Fair Day case, the Ammanford dispute had been brought to court by the Amalgamated Anthracite Company. But whereas the Neath men had some legal, if not patriotic, justification on their side, the Ammanford men had neither. They were accused by the Company of adopting "ca'canny" as an "agreed policy" during a dispute over the payment of attendance bonus. Six men were summoned for breach of contract and damages were claimed. On the application of Mr. H.P. Saunders, who defended the accused, the cases were considered separately, the first being that against Trevor Griffiths, from whom damages totally £2.9.7d. were claimed

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<sup>127</sup> PRO, Lab 34/57.

for two shifts in July. Mr. W.H.F. Barklam (for the company) said that apparently some of the workmen felt they had a grievance arising under qualifications for the attendance bonus, and the lodge as a whole decided to go "ca'canny" at the weekend.<sup>128</sup>

Prosecution counsel emphasised the democratic nature of this decision. Mr. Barklam stated that when the colliery agent and the manager saw the lodge secretary (Haydn Lewis) and the checkweigher and asked for normal working at weekends, Mr. Lewis replied that he could not do that because the decision to go "ca'canny" was the decision of the whole lodge.<sup>129</sup>

The ca'canny went on over three weekends and loss of output was alleged to have been 214 tons, 203 tons and 243 tons. Mr. Saunders, for the defendants, argued that the workmen, far from going ca'canny, worked extremely hard on the shifts in respect of which they were summoned. Griffiths, in evidence, said that on July 19th he and his partner filled one tram of coal and were then ordered by the foreman to make the place safe. They did a considerable amount of deadwork, and under the price list earned £1.17.5d. for the shift.<sup>130</sup> On July 25th they filled two trams, and again did deadwork, earning between them £1.11.6d. He agreed that an official of the Miners' Union told him that it had "been passed" they should fill only one tram of coal, and on the 19th they only filled one tram.

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128 C.G., 5.9.41.

129 Ibid.

130 Ibid.

The Chairman of the court found in favour of the Company with regard to its claim that ca'canny had occurred on the weekend of the 19th, but dismissed the charge relating to the other weekends. His wish to award "light" damages against Griffiths (as the plaintiff was "obviously not vindictive"<sup>131</sup>) was opposed by counsel acting for the Company which, quite obviously, hoped that the imposition of a heavy fine would deter others from utilizing restrictive practices for purposes of collective bargaining at individual pits. An agreement could not be reached on suggested damages of 10s in each case, and it was intimated that the cases would be fought by the Company. The bench thereupon awarded damages of £1.7.5d., the amount claimed against Griffiths and adjourned to a later date the five remaining cases.<sup>132</sup>

The Ammanford dispute was but one of an increasing number which came to the attention of the Regional Industrial Relations Officer during the later Summer and Autumn of 1941. In mid-September, he noted that "The spate of stoppages in Coal Mining over the past few weeks has become the subject of substantial press comment. An article by a special correspondent in the local press was obviously written by someone very familiar with what is going on; (it) concludes with an appeal to miners to be content to rely on constitutional action which will not involve the sacrifice of production."<sup>133</sup> By November, the Regional Officer was reporting that there seemed to him "to be an increasing

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131 Ibid.

132 Ibid.

133 PRO, Lab 10/367, RWE 20.9.41.

tendency for the rank and file to bring pressure to bear upon employers by imposing embargoes on overtime against the advice of responsible trade union officials."<sup>134</sup>

The Regional Officer did not, of course, define what he meant by a "responsible" trade union official. The Ammanford case highlighted the obvious facts that "responsibility" could be defined in several ways and that an elected union official found himself morally accountable to more than one public assembly. To meet the requirements set by the tribunes of popular, or patriotic, opinion was one thing, but to meet the demands of his rank-and-file members who elected him to represent them might be quite another.

For instance, was the Ammanford lodge secretary, Haydn Lewis, acting "responsibly" or was he not, when he followed the dictates of his lodge members and enforced the ca'canny? The democratically-taken decision to adopt a policy of ca'canny may have been defined as "irresponsible" by the Owners, Government and SWMF Executive, but certainly not so by those who took that decision.

"Responsibility", for them, meant in the first instance, the maintenance of acceptable wage-levels and conditions. They may well have considered the Nazis to have posed a greater long-term threat to this maintenance than the Amalgamated Anthracite Company but that did not mean that they were prepared, or even capable of throwing down their defences in the face of the lesser enemy simply

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135 C.G., 10.5.40.

because the government, owners and union executive had insisted that such an act would somehow aid the common effort to secure Nazi defeat. They listened to the calls for "co-operation", not as an audience of industrial innocents but as men whose views upon the integrity of Government and Owners had been shaped and tempered by the great conflicts of the previous three decades. If they chose to take unofficial action they rarely found it difficult to rationalise their position. Evidence of hopelessly inadequate industrial management and organisation lay everywhere about them. Patriotic appeals rang hollow when they came from the lips of a coalowner too full of self-interest to allow national reorganisation to take place or from a parliament still cluttered with the allies of the owners and too timid or conservative to enforce the radical reorganisation needed to boost production.

The workforce heard and read daily, for example, of the industry's acute labour shortage. Yet they remembered very clearly the debacle of June 1940 when, in its panic to solve the problem of 12,000 South Wales miners rendered idle by the Fall of France, the Government conscripted into the Armed Forces thousands of the coalfield's most skilled miners - only to discover, with increasing panic, that these same miners were, for the most part, extremely reticent to return to the pits where they were desperately needed less than eight months later.

They watched as their elected Executive members, most of them tied hand and foot to the coat-tails of the Labour Party leadership, voluntarily "relegated ... to the post-war Elysium" their demands for nationalisation,<sup>135</sup> and they watched as these same men chose,

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135 C.G., 10.5.40.



instead, to co-operate with the Government in its feeble attempt to muddle the coal industry into shape by means of piece-meal reforms.<sup>136</sup>

The Labour Party itself seemed, in the words of Rhys Davies, M.P., to be "crawling to the Right, (whilst) the workers (were) marching to the Left."<sup>137</sup> The miners' executive was seen to be following closely on the heels of its parliamentary allies, with Lawther declaring that there were no longer two sides in industry<sup>138</sup> and Horner comparing the war to a magnet which drew British workers and capitalists together in a fraternal embrace.<sup>139</sup>

Given that this stagnant political atmosphere of mutual admiration prevailed in the higher echelons after June 1941, many miners could have been forgiven for believing that they had little recourse other than to involve themselves in "direct" and unofficial action if they were successfully to convey to Government and owners alike the urgency and importance of their grievances. That such action was not taken more often in South Wales is indicative of the depth of the workforce's loyalty to the Labour Party, to the Federation and to Arthur Horner. It was a loyalty which was, of course, supplemented by wartime patriotism and by a strong sense of duty towards supporting the "boys in uniform".

Loyalty and patriotism are not, however, the most predictable of human emotions. Like "responsibility" they can be perceived

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136 M. Foot, op.cit., p.360; A. Calder, op.cit., pp.497-512.

137 Quoted in Foot, op.cit., p.360.

138 See above, p.236

139 See above, p.248

and expressed in a variety of ways - a fact borne out by the behaviour of certain sections of the South Wales workforce during and after the winter of 1941-42 when those amongst the workforce who considered themselves least bound by the parliamentary - CPGB "united-front" began to display signs of great restlessness and impatience with the behaviour of their trade union leaders.

Many miners, and especially the youngest amongst them, argued openly that, if they were to be enabled to give of their best at their places of work, then they must be suitably rewarded for it. "Patriotism" flourished most vigorously amongst them when its rewards appeared most concrete. Appeals to show love of country through toil and sacrifice were likely to be accepted most readily when accompanied by effective gestures aimed at reducing social and economic inequality and injustice. The demand for such gestures increased as the prospect of a Nazi victory diminished with the entry into the war of the Soviet Union and the United States. Increased demand brought with it increased strain on the bridges constructed between the trade unions, the government and its Communist supporters. The resulting tensions reflected themselves within individual unions and, in the case of the miners' union, within individual pits. As we shall see in the following chapter, nowhere were these tensions more clearly displayed than in the events surrounding the pit-boys' strikes of 1942-43 in South Wales.

## Chapter Seven

1942 - 1944

### 1. The Boys' Strikes and the Calls for a Second Front

During the latter part of May through early June 1942, the South Wales coalfield experienced a large number of simultaneous stoppages which resulted directly from the unofficial action of pit-boys. The importance of this development was recognised by the Government's Regional Officer for Wales and he duly reported to his supervisors that, in his opinion, it placed in grave danger the possibility of continued co-operation between Owners, Government and the Miners' Federation:

"It is significant ...", he reported, "that the initiative is being taken by the youth in the industry. For several years past, the disciplinary hold of the SWMF upon its members has been exemplary, and taking the size of the coalfield into consideration, the extent to which unofficial stoppages of work have occurred may be regarded as very small. Presumably the Federation's grip upon its older members is still very strong, and the habit of constitutional action has become ingrained. It has been left to the younger element to throw off restraint and give vent to the exasperation they feel when they find that their sweethearts and sisters receive bigger weekly wages than they do." 1

The numbers of disputes directly attributable to grievances amongst pit boys had risen annually in the three years preceding the outbreak of the war.<sup>2</sup> Like their older comrades, they had

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1 PRO, Lab 10/368, RWE 30.5.42.

2 1937 - 4 strikes; 1938 - 8 strikes; 1939 - 11 strikes; Information from PRO, Disputes Books Lab.34.

been a good deal more subdued during the critical Summer and Autumn of 1940, though earlier that year a number of Amalgamated Anthracite pits situated in the upper Swansea Valley (and especially those around Gwaun cae Gurwen) had experienced a spate of stoppages provoked by dissatisfaction amongst pit boys with their wages and conditions of work.<sup>3</sup>

As pit boys, they found themselves relatively well-placed as far as taking unofficial, or "direct", action was concerned. They were not usually the sole breadwinners for their families but, at the same time, they played important, and sometimes crucial, roles in the cycle of operations below ground. One ex-miner recalled that, as a boy,

"... I wan't worried about shouting the odds ...  
'I'm a member of the union ...' But as I got close to 21 even I began to get cautious. I had to watch or I might have got the poke. As it was I got the poke anyway ... I was 21; I wanted a man's wage, I was too old for the management."<sup>4</sup>

This tendency amongst pit boys to "shout the odds" could cause friction not only between themselves and management, but also between themselves and their older workmates. A strike at Pentre colliery, Kenfig Hill, in July 1939, for example, had caused older men at the pit to complain that "the votes of boys and young men with no responsibility" had resulted in the decision

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3 PRO, Lab 10/366.

4 Recording of Glyn Williams, Trecynon, May 1975.

to down-tools - despite the fact that "almost all the older men were willing to go down to work pending negotiations."<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, it was to prove the exception, rather than the rule, for boys to be joined in their unofficial actions by the men. In September 1941, over 200 boys stopped work at the Evans and Bevan collieries of the Upper Dulais Valley after they had been "misinformed" that they would not receive "promotion" to men's wages until they were 25.<sup>6</sup> At these pits, the rest of the workforce (i.e. the older men) continued working as they were to do during the strikes of May-June 1942. The boys were joined by the men at only eleven collieries during this latter wave,<sup>7</sup> and it is obvious that considerable bitterness and confusion accompanied the division of loyalties engendered by

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5 C.G., 28.7.39.

6 PRO, Lab 10/367.

7 PRO, Lab 10/368. The pits where men joined the boys were

New Varteg	Bryn
Cwmllynfell	Ystalyfera
Blaenant	New Cross Hands* (A.A. Colliery)
Tareni	New Blaenhirwaun
Dillwyn	Duffryn Rhondda (P.D. Colliery)
Pentwyn	

The strike involved 9,750 colliery boys between 23.5.42. and 6.6.42., and 2,750 between 15.6.42. and 29.6.42.

the boys' action. It manifested itself most clearly at the large and militant Duffryn Rhondda colliery near Cymmer in the Avan Valley. Here, the boys were joined by 150 men (out of a total workforce of around one thousand) - despite advice to the contrary by the lodge committee and despite the fact that all SWMF officials at the pit continued to work throughout the dispute.<sup>8</sup>

But if the boys generally failed to overcome the loyalty to the official Federation line within their pits, their actions nevertheless provoked displays of solidarity from other quarters. The Regional Officer reported in June 1942, that their action was "having repercussions on other industries...", and cited the fact that "thirty two boys at the Tondu Brickworks have been on strike all this week, and have openly stated that the 'success' of the boys in the mines has relieved them of any fears of penalties."<sup>9</sup> Tondu is situated close to the mines of Kenfig and Aberbaiden and the influence of the pit boys and of their non striking elders reflected itself in the Brickworks dispute where the men stayed at work and obeyed the dictates of the N.U.G.M.W.'s official in Tondu as the Kenfig and Aberbaiden men had obeyed their Federation's officials.

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8 PRO, Lab 10/368, RWE 20.6.42.

9 PRO, Lab 10/368, RWE 13.6.42. They struck with the object of "forcing the employer to pay wages in excess of J.I.C. Scales, and the refusal of the youths to accept a substantial offer by the employer, which was recommended by the official of the N.U.G.M.W." Ibid., RWE 20.6.42.

The boys' actions were not permanently centred in any one part of the coalfield, though the wave of strikes originated in the Dulais and Swansea Valleys and in the pits of Gwaun cae Gurwen. They began around the 23rd of May and ended, temporarily, on the 6th of June when the Government announced that the Green Committee would investigate and report immediately upon the national wages situation in the industry. The Committee reported and the boys duly struck work and announced their extreme dissatisfaction with the proposals. This second wave of strikes lasted from June 15th to June 29th 1942, and, although it involved only a third of the number of boys involved in the first wave, its centre had shifted to the pits of the steam coal area and especially to those in the valleys of the Avan, Llynfi and Garw rivers - valleys which had seen little or no independent action by youngsters since 1937, apart, that is, from isolated incidents at the Glengarw mine. With the single exception of the minority mentioned at Duffryn Rhondda, however, the boys of these mines struck alone and were refused active support from their elders. The resulting sense of isolation seems to have reflected itself in the apparent reticence displayed by boys from these valleys to involve themselves in the wave of boys' strikes which struck out, once more, from the anthracite "trouble centres" in October and September of the following year.

The majority of incidents in which striking boys were joined by their elders occurred in the anthracite area and it was there that pit boys continued most frequently to involve themselves in unofficial and independent actions. In the steam coal area, discipline seems to have been imposed with much greater effectiveness by the Federation's officers.

The SWMF Executive Committee had accepted the recommendations of the Green Committee and had quickly informed the dissident boys that they must honour this acceptance.<sup>10</sup> A special delegate conference was convened by the Executive to decide upon measures to be taken to discipline the boys. Its results were reported to the Regional Industrial Relations Officer. "The numerous stoppages in the South Wales collieries", he wrote, "have terminated. The boys, as expected, have been dealt with firmly by the officials of the SWMF, and it has been made clear to them that they will get no sympathy if they persist in their attitude. Apparently they have accepted the position and work has been resumed."<sup>11</sup>

The press echoed the calls of Owners and SWMF leaders for discipline and uninterrupted production in the Welsh pits. That faithful organ of the Coalowners, the "Western Mail", for instance, publicised a speech given by a delegate to the 1942 Miners' Conference at Blackpool which fiercely condemned the unofficial action of the boys: "The pity is", commented the Mail's editorial, "that this was not said long ago by every leader in the coalfield and that we have had to wait to be threatened with a serious shortage of coal before the imperative duty of producing more is generally recognised."<sup>12</sup>

Horner, himself, set the tone of the Blackpool Conference when he warned the assembled delegates that "No man was fighting Nazism in this war, whether he be miner or Minister, if he were

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10 PRO, Lab 10/368, RWE 27.6.42.

11 Ibid., RWE 4.7.42.

12 Western Mail.



not giving his best in whatever job he might be called upon to do."<sup>13</sup> Bill Paynter emphasised this warning by moving a resolution welcoming the decision of the Allies to open a Second Front "during 1942" and he was seconded by Sam Watson of Durham who exploited the opportunity to take a broad swipe at unofficial strikers by declaring that "it would be nonsense to demand a second front and then to condone *irresponsibility* in the coal field."<sup>14</sup> He was supported, in turn, by speakers from the Yorkshire and Scottish areas and, most forcibly, by a South Wales delegate, William Betty, who argued that "... coal was needed, not ideology or political philosophy." He regretted that "South Wales had not been pulling its weight" and went on to declare that "to talk about a second front without producing the means to open a second front was hypocrisy. It was one thing to talk in terms of ideology", he argued, "and another to pass this resolution and then go back home and tell the mineworkers what the resolution really meant."<sup>15</sup> The resolution was passed unanimously.

Betty's defence of Paynter's resolution highlighted the remarkable degree of unity which had developed between Communists and non-Communists on the miners' executive. It also highlighted just how worried the executive was about the rank-and-file's apparent lack of urgency in the way it regarded the war-effort.

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13 MFGB Annual Conference Report, 1942.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

His demand, that a spirit of "non-political" co-operation should show itself upon the field, must have sounded ominously familiar to those amongst the miners who recalled the words of the advocates of company unionism - the so-called "non pols" - of the late 1920s and '30s and it must have also appeared somewhat ironic that Betty's "non pol" plea should have been made in support of two of the men who had done more than most to destroy Company unionism : Horner and Paynter.

In the latter part of his speech, Betty implied that the miners of South Wales were not convinced that extra production was needed, or, at least, that they were unenthusiastic about the prospect of expending the "maximum effort" so often requested of them by their Government and elected industrial leaders. In implying this he was merely echoing the warnings of Will Lawther who earlier had reminded the Conference that the recent changes (whereby the Government had imposed national control of the industry - though not of the profits - and awarded a general increase in wages) demanded a renewed response from the mineworkers. They had to give the nation the coal it needed, he said. He and his colleagues had "pledged their work and expressed their faith that the changes they had obtained would help to give the coal needed day by day. If the miners failed", he warned, "it would be a long, long day before the nation again listened in patience to any of their proposals."<sup>16</sup>

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16 Ibid.

He was followed to the stand a little later by Major Lloyd George, the Minister of Fuel and Power, who contrasted the advances obtained by the Government on behalf of the miners with the "aimlessness" of the young Welsh strikers :

"It is a significant thing that this great advance has been secured without strike action.", observed Major Lloyd George, "Was it any worse for that? If there were any young men in the mining industry who might have the idea that it was," he could only say the idea was "extremely dangerous." 17

He mentioned the young men particularly because he alleged that when he took up the Ministry he was "disturbed to find in more than one coalfield a strike of boys", and when he inquired what the strikes were about the only answer he could get was "No reason given". He assured his audience that he had always been a believer in trade unionism: "It is a system that has taken a good deal of fighting to set up and it is worth preserving. If there is one way in which the system can be destroyed it is by disregarding the advice of elected leaders."<sup>18</sup>

There may have been "No reason given" for the boys' strikes but the Conference nevertheless deemed it necessary to devote its closing session to approving an important memorandum on the employment of boys in the coal mining industry. This memorandum, which became known as the "Boy's Charter", was prepared by a sub-committee for presentation to the Government as a statement of the

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17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

Federation's policy for dealing with the decline in the number of boys entering the industry. The decline was extremely serious; Ebby Edwards (the MFGB General Secretary) calculated it to be somewhere in the region of 30% in some areas.<sup>19</sup>

Mr. J. Barbour, who moved the resolution formally approving the memorandum, said that one reason for the decline was the falling birthrate. Another was the prejudice of parents against allowing their boys to enter the industry. This latter problem should be counteracted, he argued, by ensuring that the prospects which the industry held out to boys compared favourably with those of other industries. There must be regular and permanent employment at a satisfactory standard of wages, proper training and full opportunities to qualify for promotion, and conditions as safe and congenial as they could be made.<sup>20</sup> Insisting strongly upon the need for improved safety conditions, he said that one in four of the boys employed underground had in recent times been the victims of accidents. All boys on entering the industry should receive preliminary training directed to safety precautions. At least a fortnight's training should be compulsory and should be given under a practical tutor at a special gallery in a mine or at a school of mining provided for the purpose. As to wages, it was suggested that the Government should fix a national minimum daily wage at "datal" rates for boys and youths from 15 to 20 years of age. At 20 years of age boys should be paid the adult wage.<sup>21</sup>

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19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

Although many of these proposals were not to see fruition until post-war nationalisation, nevertheless, the unofficial action of the pit boys had, at least, caused the Federation Executive to sit up and take notice. Amongst the boys themselves, the long term effects of their endeavours are less clear. Many of the collieries within which they struck were to figure strongly in the unofficial disputes of the decade following 1945, but that is hardly surprising as these same collieries had figured equally strongly in the disputes of the decade prior to 1939. The strikes of May-July, 1942, took place in pits at which the colliery combine committees had organised in the 1930s. Of the 49 collieries involved in the strikes, (out of a fluctuating total of around 200 pits operating on the coalfield<sup>22</sup>) just eight of them did not belong to one or other of the big combine companies. Thirteen were owned by Amalgamated Anthracite, four by Ocean, five by Partridge Jones and John Paton, and so on.<sup>23</sup>

Of the eight "independents", six were situated in the anthracite area and of these, at least three (Tareni, Brynhenllys and Cwmllynfell) were collieries which possessed quite prolific strike records. As the following Table shows, they experienced between them no fewer than 79 strikes during the years 1927 to 1939:

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22 & 23 See page 268

- 22 Although the numbers of operational pits fluctuated with demand, the following list gives a close approximation of the numbers working in 1942. For the sake of convenience, they are divided into three geographical categories:
- (a) those situated in the Western, or anthracite, sector;
  - (b) those situated in the central, or dry-steam, sector;
  - (c) those situated in the eastern, or so-called house-coal, sector.
- This does not mean, however, that all of the pits located in any one sector necessarily produced only one type of coal or even that they produced the coal of that sector. Some, like the Dillwyn Colliery in the Anthracite sector, produced Dry-Steam as well as Anthracite. Others, like the Hendy Merthyr Colliery in the Swansea Valley sector of the Anthracite field concentrated its activities upon underlying seams of Housecoal and Dry-Steam and produced little or no Anthracite. The categories generally reflect similarities in the type of coal mined:

- (a) The Western Sector : 63 pits operational.
- (b) The Central Sector : 79 pits operational.
- (c) The Eastern Sector : 58 pits operational.

- 23 The full list of owners was as follows:

Amalgamated Anthracite	...	12 collieries
Evans and Bevan	...	4 collieries
Partridge Jones & John Paton	...	5 collieries
Blaenavan Iron & Coal	...	3 collieries
Baldwins	...	3 collieries
Corys (largely P.D. controlled)	...	2 collieries
Norths (largely P.D. controlled)	...	3 collieries
Powell Duffryn	...	1 colliery
Glenavon Garw	...	2 collieries
Ocean	...	4 collieries
"Independent" Companies	...	8 collieries

Sources : Lab 10/368 (PRO);  
Colliery Year Book and Coal Trades Directory, 1943.

TABLE ONE

Sources: PRO, Lab 10/368

W.J. Anthony Jones, op.cit., Appendix E, Tables 1, 2 and 3.

The strikes and disputes records for the period 1927-39 of those collieries in which boys struck work during May, June and July, 1942.

Category (a) indicates the number of strikes or partial stoppages (involving ten or more men in strikes of at least one shift's duration and occurring at collieries employing over fifty men) experienced during the period 1927-39;

Category (b) indicates how many disputes, if any, were referred from individual collieries to the Joint Standing Disputes Committee, 1927-39;

Category (c) indicates whether or not individual collieries experienced the loss of more than 5,000 man-shifts because of strikes during 1927-39.

Collieries at which the 1942 strikes took place		Category (a)	Category (b)	Category (c)
	<u>Owners</u>			
Abercrave	AA	12	22	yes
Cefn Coed	AA	8	-	yes
New Varteg	AA	-	-	-
Yniscedwyn	AA	15	1	yes
Steer	AA	27	31	yes
Maerdy/East	AA	25/25	31/31	yes (")
Gelliceidrim	AA	16	24	-
Cwmlllynfell	"ind"	10	-	-
Blaenant	"ind"	-	-	-
Pentwyn	"ind"	-	-	-
Tareni	"ind"	38	27	yes
Brynhenllys	"ind"	31	24	yes
Onllwyn No. 1	E&B	8	-	yes
Dillwyn	E&B	-	-	-
Brynteg	E&B	10	-	-
Rhas	E&B	-	-	-
Ystalyfera	AA	-	-	-
New Cross Hands	AA	-	43	-
New Blaenhirwaun	"ind"	-	-	-
Waun Lwyd	PJ & JP	28	-	yes
Marine	PJ & JP	24	-	yes
Rose Heyworth	PJ & JP	-	-	-
Vivian	PJ & JP	-	-	-
Beynon	PJ & JP	-	-	-
Big Pit	Blaenavan	16	-	yes
Garn Slope	Blaenavan	12	-	yes
Kays Slope	Blaenavan	8	-	yes
West End	"ind"	-	-	-
Pentre Slant	Baldwins	-	-	-
Aberbaiden Slant	Baldwins	-	-	-
Bryn	Baldwins	7	-	yes
Newlands	"ind"	-	-	-
Ffaldau	Cory	6	-	yes
Cymmer	P.D.(subsid.)	-	-	-
Glyncorrgw	AA	7	-	-
Nantewlaeth	O	6	-	-Caurau
Caurau	Norths(P.D.)	-	-	-
Coegnant	Norths(P.D.)	-	-	-
Duffryn Rhondda	P.D.	7	-	yes
St. Johns	Norths(P.D.)	6	27	yes
Glenavon	G.G.	-	-	-
Glengarw	G.G.	13	26	yes
International	O	8	40	yes
Garw	O	6	38	yes
Risca	O	6	28	yes
Cwmgorse	AA	9	-	-
Pwllbach	AA	-	-	-
Ffaldydre	Cory	-	-	-

Two of the three remaining anthracite "independents"<sup>24</sup> were situated adjacent to Amalgamated Anthracite mines in which boys had struck work.<sup>25</sup> The third "independent", Blaenant, was situated in the militant Dulais valley where its workforce had a long tradition of lending their support to the neighbouring collieries of <sup>the</sup> Evans and Bevan combine. (Boys had struck work in four of the E & B combine's pits).

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- 24 In 1939, there were 198 pits (employing 20 or more men) in production on the South Wales coalfield. As I have attempted to show in Appendix Two, the task of sorting out who owned which pits is a difficult one because of the complexity of inter-directorial links between colliery companies. For the purposes of this Chapter, I have divided the 198 collieries into two categories:
- (a) those owned by companies owning four or more pits, and
  - (b) those owned by companies owning less than four.
- The latter category are those referred to as "independents" but the point cannot be stressed enough that there were individuals sitting upon the directorial boards of these "independents" who also sat upon the boards of companies like Powell Duffryn - i.e. those companies referred to as "combines".

	Total number of pits operating in 1939 : -	198
of these( " " " " owned by "independents" : -		44
( " " " " owned by "combines" : -		154

A breakdown of the numbers of pits owned by combine companies (and in production) in 1939 looks like this:

Powell Duffryn Associated Collieries	51 pits
Amalgamated Anthracite	37 pits
Ocean Coal	22 pits
Partridge Jones and John Paton	12 pits
Cory Brothers	11 pits
Evans and Bevans	5 pits
Baldwins	4 pits
Blaenavon	4 pits
Tredegar Iron and Steel	4 pits
Lancaster's Steam	4 pits

Information based upon Colliery Companies subscribing to the Colliery Year Book and Coal Trades Directory.

- 25 New Blaenhirwaum was adjacent to Amalgamated Anthracite's New Cross Hands colliery and Pentwyn was adjacent to the same company's Ystalyfera colliery.



The two steam-coal "independents", West End (Cymmer) and Newlands, were in similar situations. The Cymmer pit was squeezed between the strikers of Duffryn Rhondda (a P.D. property) and Glyncoirwg, (owned by a subsidiary of Amalgamated Anthracite) and the Newlands drift drew its workforce from the communities which also supplied the youthful strikers at the Pentre and Aberbaiden slants.

Geographically, the strikers were concentrated for the most part in those areas of the South Wales coalfield which had displayed the highest propensity towards involvement in unofficial or "direct" action at the place of work: the central-northern section of the anthracite field including Gwaun-cae-Gurwen and the Upper Swansea and Dulais valleys; the central-southern section of the steam-coal area including the Avan, Llynfi and Garw valleys; and the north-eastern section of the Monmouthshire field including the areas around Blaenavon, Abertillery and, a little further to the south, Cross Keys and Risca.

Unofficial action was absent most obviously in the great and productive central steam coal area of the field; the pits of the Rhondda, Aberdare, Taff, Rhymney and Ogmere valleys worked with little or no disruption throughout the dispute as did the highly productive Aberpergwm, Rock, Cwmgwrach and Rhigos mines on the eastern extremity of the anthracite field. There were, in addition, significant pockets of "inactivity" within areas disrupted by the dispute: the Monmouthshire pits, Cwmtillery, TyTrist and Pochin, remained solidly at work whilst the neighbouring pits of Beynon, Rose Heyworth, Marine and Waun Lwyd suffered considerable disruption.

In the west, only 13 of the 32 Amalgamated Anthracite pits were disrupted - the SWMF officials at the Company's Ystradgynlais, Tirbach, Brynamman, Glanamman, Wernos, Raven and Ammanford mines maintained discipline amongst their pit-boy memberships despite the formidable unofficial strike records which these mines possessed.<sup>26</sup>

Of those pits in which boys struck work, some 20 of them were not regarded as possessing workforces prone to using unofficial action as a means of settling disputes. In the case of those situated in the central-southern steam coal area, the boys' strikes seem to have heralded something of a renaissance of unofficial activity and the same could be argued for the Varteg, Blaenant, Pentwyn, Pwllbach, Dillwyn, Rhas, Ystalyfera and New Blaenhirwaun mines of the anthracite area since not one of them had experienced more than five strikes during the twelve years from the end of the 1926 Lockout to the outbreak of the war.<sup>27</sup>

Quite the most startling feature of the 1942 wave of boys' strikes, however, was the absence of such action within the previously militant pits of the Rhondda and Ogmore Valleys. Like those of the Aberdare, Taff and Rhymney Valleys, the Rhondda and Ogmore pits were largely controlled by the Powell Duffryn and Ocean combines, but, unlike the pits of their neighbouring valleys, they were well organized within SWMF combine committees or else, like

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26 Between 1927 and 1939, Ystradgynlais experienced 13 strikes; Tirbach 9; Brynamman 12; Glanamman 8; Wernos 7; Raven 7 and Ammanford 7. W.J. Anthony-Jones, op.cit. Appendix E, Table 1.

27 Ibid.

Fernhill colliery, they possessed watertight and militant SWMF lodges. The lack of unofficial action by boys in the Aberdare, Taff and Rhymney pits can, as we have seen, be at least partially explained by the fact that the Federation lodges in these areas were still, or had been until very recently, weak and even oppressed. Such an explanation would not suffice, however, when applied to the Rhondda and Ogmore pits, nor would it when applied to the non-striking anthracite mines like Aberpergwm, Ystradgynlais and Brynamman. The confidence which membership of the combine committees had inspired in these pits had enabled their workforces to involve themselves in a wide range of unofficial actions during the previous decade. Thus we find amongst the Rhondda and Ogmore pits in which boys declined to strike in 1942 names which had ranked high in the list of collieries most prone to experience unofficial action: Wyndham, Glenrhondda, Fernhill and Cambrian. All had experienced nine or more strikes apiece between 1927 and 1939 and there was, in addition, at least one case, in 1936, of Rhondda boys organizing their own "stay-down" strike (at Parc and Dare colliery).<sup>28</sup> Clearly, there was no lack of precedence for the adoption of unofficial action. To argue, on the other hand, that the decision of the boys not to strike in the Rhondda and Ogmore valleys was the result of pressure exerted upon them by the powerful P.D. and Ocean combine committees would still not explain why the "independently" - owned pits of Fernhill and Glenrhondda, for example, also remained untroubled by the

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28 Recording of Will Paynter, London, March 1977.

dispute. Neither would it explain why the individual lodges of the P.D. and Ocean combine committees managed to retain complete discipline within the Rhondda and Ogmore valleys but failed to do so in other, neighbouring, valleys such as that of the Garw. (Nor why the equally powerful and militant Amalgamated Anthracite combine committee failed to hold discipline in 13 A.A. collieries).

The answer would seem to lie within the realms of political geography. For the most part, (though, as we shall see, not always) the pits which remained solidly at work were those which had been organized most tightly and effectively by the Communist Party. The Rhondda, along with Merthyr, Aberdare and the Ammanford area of the anthracite field, had provided the Communist Party's organizational backbone during the inter-war years, and in wartime they continued to display remarkable loyalty to the Party's official line on production for the war effort. There was to be no major strike or disturbance to production at any Rhondda colliery from June 1941, until the great coalfield protest against the Porter Award in 1944.

In the light of the Rhondda's previous industrial relations' record, this constituted something of a phenomenon and one which must be attributed, not only to the political loyalty displayed by Communist lodge officials who were involved in maintaining discipline at their pits, but also to a timely combination of wartime patriotism, a genuine and prevailing enthusiasm for the endeavours of the Red Army, an ingrained habit amongst the Rhondda's miners of standing solidly behind the democratic decisions of their elected leaders and a warm regard for the most

dynamic of those leaders - the Rhondda boy - Arthur Horner.

This is not to argue, however, that the issue of the Boys' Strikes did not arouse a great deal of bitterness within the central section of the coalfield, for, undoubtedly, it did. Bitterness was aroused, not only at individual pits - as at Duffryn Rhondda in the Avan Valley (see above) - but also within the Miners' Executive and within the ranks of the Communist Party members in South Wales. As we have seen, the Party's pro-war "line" ruled hard against unofficial action of any sort which might hinder war production, and the Boys' Strikes were, of course, considered hinderances of the worst kind. They were sectional in character - one Executive member described them as a case of "the tail wagging the dog"<sup>28</sup> - and as such, they were immediately denounced as being not only unpatriotic but also undemocratic and in opposition to the true spirit of trade unionism.

One can deduce from the placatory gestures of the MFGB Executive at the Blackpool Annual Conference in 1942, (with its proposed "Boys' Charter") however, that there existed widespread sympathy for the plight of the industry's youngest workers. The animosity directed against those boys who struck work was largely the product of a general feeling that the strikers had chosen the wrong tactics at the wrong time. Even so, it is quite clear that this animosity was not shared by all adult

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28 Recording of Will Paynter, London, March 1977.

workers nor even by all Executive members of the SWMF.

The two Executive members from the Garw Valley, for instance, (where the boys had struck work at four large pits) "argued bitterly" over the *pros and cons of the action*.<sup>29</sup> One of them, the Miners' Agent for the valley and future President of the Welsh Miners' Union, Alf Davies, condemned the strikes as unconstitutional and irresponsible. He brought to bear upon the strikers the full weight of his authority as Chairman of the Ocean Combine Committee (Ocean owned four of the pits affected, including two in the Garw valley) and caused one ex-leader of the dissident boys to complain later that he could still feel the whiplash of Davies' words upon his back.<sup>30</sup> The boys were supported in their action, however, by the other Executive member for the valley, Dai Rolf Llewellyn, who had been, up to that point, a personal friend of Alf Davies, and, like Davies, a member of the Communist Party.<sup>31</sup> Their argument resulted, not only in the break-up of their friendship, but also in Llewellyn's leaving the Communist Party, joining the Labour Party and forming a "Labour Group" (within the SWMF Executive) which would gather before each subsequent Executive Council meeting in order that its members might plan and decide upon tactics for counteracting the influence of the Communists on the Executive who were centred around Arthur Horner.<sup>32</sup>

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29 Ibid.

30 Recording of Mr. Howells, Chairman of Ffaldau Lodge, by Stuart Broomfield. Transcript in Coalfield Collection, Miners' Library, Swansea.

31 Dai Rolf had also fought in the International Brigade in Spain.

32 Recording of Will Paynter, op.cit.

Not surprisingly, it was Horner and his supporters who received the support of the mineowners (albeit strictly verbal support). Amalgamated Anthracite's Chairman, Szarvasy, for example, reported to his shareholders in July 1942 that "Relations with labour during the year could only be referred to with mixed feelings."<sup>33</sup> Whereas a general agreement with the workmen's representatives had "consistently been reached", said Szarvasy, "and the collieries operated throughout on a basis agreed with the SWMF, there had been quite a number of illegal strikes at the collieries due to an unruly minority interest..." "These stoppages", he claimed, "... were deplored as much by the workmen's leaders as by (the owners), and (they, the owners) could only put on record that those unwarrantable interferences with production, which had proved so costly and have lost the country a considerable tonnage of output, had taken place because a young and unruly element did not appear to realise their proper obligations to their fellow workers and to the nation."<sup>34</sup> He reiterated that the men's leaders and managers had worked together with common appreciation of the over-ruling anxiety to produce coal to help win the war, and that nothing should stand in the way of that objective.

Szarvasy's view was reflected less than a month later by the SWMF Rhondda Area Secretary, Mr. A. James, who referred to a recent appeal for increased production issued by the MFGB.

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33 C.G., 31.7.42.

34 Ibid.

He declared his "unreserved support" for bigger coal output and informed his Rhondda audience that the SWMF Executive had already considered plans for increasing production. Some of them meant that miners would be expected to make sacrifices that the men's leaders would not call upon them to make in peace-time ... but the "times were unprecedented, and individual rights and privileges must be conceded in this hour of danger. If the miners of South Wales were not prepared to forgo certain traditional customs for the sake of increased production they faced the social consequences of defeat and the risk of spending the rest of their lives under the Nazi heel."<sup>35</sup>

At the Blackpool Conference, Horner warned the assembled delegates that "Unless sufficient coal were produced it was a sheer waste of time for industries which depended on coal to talk about the possibilities of increased production."<sup>36</sup> He hoped that workers would co-operate now that the coal industry had been granted "the most advanced form of joint control that had ever existed in this country." He continued, "There is, in the experience of the workers, the possibility of unleashing an initiative which has never been known in our industrial history. The story of the Stakhanovite movement is not a story of harder work, but of greater incentiviness, initiative, and the exercise of enthusiasm in the task in hand, and they have discovered that the greatest task before them is to convince their own people of the necessity of 100 per cent participation in production."<sup>37</sup>

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35 Ibid., 28.8.42.

36 MFGB Annual Conference Report, 1942.

37 Ibid.



In the past, observed Horner, miners had been "justifiably suspicious, for the more they produced, the greater the measure of unemployment." The assembled delegates were told to go back to their pits and to "convince the men that fears about tomorrow are a useless waste of time unless we emerge successfully through this gigantic battle..." and success or defeat would depend on efficient production and the maximum utilization of resources.<sup>38</sup>

Horner's rhetoric was heeded: by the first week of July, all the boys were back at work and the miners of the Neath Valley announced their intention to forgo their annual Fair Day holiday. Despite this apparent wealth of productive and patriotic fervour there remained, nevertheless, a good deal of anxiety in government and union circles regarding what was interpreted as a lack of what Horner had called the "Stakhanovite" spirit in the pits of South Wales.

In late August, the Regional Controller observed that "considerable prominence has been given in the local press to the appeal by the MFGB for a great coal output. South Wales miners' officials are quoted as being in full accord with the Federation's appeal, and some of their statements, as reported are of interest. For example:-

"The workmen of South Wales cannot expect to drift along complacently clinging to old manners, traditions and customs, when their comrades of the working classes in many other lands are even now working as slaves."

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38 Ibid.

Again:-

"Unfortunately, there is still some avoidable absenteeism and, personally, I have no room for men who habitually absent themselves in this grave hour."

And again:-

"I agree a sense of responsibility is lacking in a large number of our men, but they refuse to understand the gravity of the position and have ignored all reasonable appeals. I am convinced nothing will move them except drastic action by the responsible authorities." 39

Once again, it was the Rhondda which responded with most flair to these criticisms and warnings. At the Valley's Fernhill colliery (previously the most strike-prone pit in the Rhondda: its workforce holds to this day the duration record for a stay-down strike) the miners' lodge committee organized "shock brigades" of colliery boys in what contemporary observers described as "an interesting experiment designed to increase coal production."<sup>40</sup> The brigades consisted of groups of boys banded together to "engage in friendly competition to secure the maximum output under conditions of efficiency."<sup>41</sup> A cash prize was awarded periodically to the best brigade - the prize to be won by the team whose members "showed the greatest regularity and punctuality at work and the most intensive effort having regard to the difficulties of the working places."<sup>42</sup> The Chairman and Joint

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39 PRO, Lab 10/368, RWE 22.8.42.

40 C.G., 18.9.42.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

Managing Director of the Fernhill Colliery Company announced, during the following month, that output was up on last year - despite an increase in avoidable absenteeism and particularly weekend absenteeism.<sup>43</sup>

The Fernhill example was followed in the Dulais Valley by the colliers at Evans and Bevans' Onllwyn No. 1 pit where, just three and a half months earlier, pit boys had joined the first wave of unofficial strikes. The Onllwyn lodge contained a number of active and influential Communists (including the future General Secretary of the South Wales miners, David Francis) and it was appropriate that they should have entitled their particular productivity drive a "Stalingrad Week". Organized by the colliery's P.P.C., (Pit Production Committee) they succeeded through two successive weeks in breaking the pit's production record. In the third week, however, tonnages began to flag: "... they were 70 tons behind schedule on Friday and a pithead meeting was followed by the desired result."<sup>44</sup>

Such enthusiasm was comparatively short-lived. Within a year, the pit-boys of the anthracite area were once again to cause considerable disruption to coal supplies, but, long before then, blame for the overall decline in productivity had shifted onto the shoulders of their elder brothers - onto those of the young, fully-trained colliers who distinguished themselves, or so it was widely alleged, by their lack of discipline and regular attendance at work.

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43 Ibid., 30.10.42.

44 Ibid., 23.10.42.

## 2. Problems of Under-production

In October 1940, Merthyr Juvenile Court fined a collier's assistant 10/- and £2 damages for committing wilful damage to a conveyor belt and doing damage to the extent of £5.

Mr. W. Cledwyn Morgan, who appeared for the boy's employers, Powell Duffryn, claimed that in addition to the damage done to the belt, the Company had lost 80 tons of coal owing to the time the belt was out of action as a result of being broken. Asked by the court why he had cut the belt, the accused said he did it to have a "long spell".<sup>45</sup>

Miners "taking a spell", in one form or another, constituted, in the eyes of the coalowners, the greatest single impediment to consistent production and increased output. Most miners, however, took their "spells" in fashions far less dramatic than that chosen by the Merthyr youth: the usual practice was quite simply to miss a shift and thereby to swell the numbers listed in company books as "voluntarily absent". The conflict which this practice engendered within the coal industry was referred to in a leading article published in the New Statesman in March 1942. It claimed that,

"The mood of the men has been and still is desperate and embittered; they agreed when war came to suspend the class struggle - but the root of the trouble is psychological. The owners who spoke in the debate drove home their case against the men on the score of absenteeism. The men on their side have a devastating answer.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 18.10.40.

"It is frequent, and may be, in some coalfields, a general practice, to work the worst seams during the war in order to conserve the richer seams for the unchecked and unlimited exploitation to which owners look forward when peace returns." 46

The use of the phrase, "desperate and embittered", to describe the mood of the miners in 1942 is indicative of the depth of public concern which was engendered by the allegedly poor performance of the wartime mining industry. It was generally recognised in South Wales, as in most other coalfields, that the greatest bugbear of the producers was shortage of manpower - a problem which was greatly aggravated, in the eyes of the coalowners, by a continuing high percentage of avoidable absenteeism amongst their employees. They pointed to the fact that during the week ended July 25th 1942, the South Wales miners produced the highest Tonnage of the year: 600,222 tons of coal, and that this had been achieved as a result of a "spurt" prior to the annual week's holiday with pay in August.<sup>47</sup> The owners did not miss the opportunity to point out that, during that "bull" week, avoidable absenteeism had been only 2.73 per cent and unavoidable absenteeism 4.29 per cent. By the middle of August the output per manshift of ~~a~~11 persons employed had fallen by 1.17 cwt. Compared with the week ended July 25th, avoidable absenteeism had increased to 5.23 per cent.<sup>48</sup> The

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46 New Statesman, 21.3.42.

47 C.G., 1.1.43.

48 Ibid.

Colliery Guardian estimated that "... output would rise by 60,000 tons per week or about three million tons a year if the pre-holiday spurt results had been maintained.", but added as an after-thought that, "It must be said, in fairness, that the miners might not be expected to maintain that pace over a period. Nevertheless, it shows what they are capable of."<sup>49</sup>

The South Wales Miners' Federation, on the other hand, whilst admitting the existence of a "small percentage of our people who absent themselves from work without reasonable cause ..." <sup>50</sup> transferred the blame for the industry's poor performance back onto the shoulders of the coalowners. In 1942, for example, the Federation claimed that the position could be improved dramatically if three of its proposals were instigated by the Government. It called, firstly, for the establishment of a "national unified plan-control of the industry" whereby mineworkers would be "placed in the position that they work for the benefit of the nation and not for private gain"; secondly, for the return of a sufficient number of personnel to enable the industry to meet the task set before it; and, thirdly, to establish wage-rates and conditions of work for men and boys which would stand comparison with those obtaining in other war industries. <sup>51</sup> Those who indulged in avoidable absenteeism, argued the President of the SWMF, brought miners generally into disrepute and should be "dealt with ruthlessly and be treated as enemies ... and a menace to the country."<sup>52</sup>

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49 Ibid.

50 SWMF Conference Report, 1942, "Presidential Address", p.8.

51 Ibid., pp.6-7.

52 Ibid., p.8.

The real cause of the industry's low productivity and output during the war years had a great deal more to do with its recent history than with immediate problems concerning absenteeist miners or irresponsible Merthyr belt-rippers. That this was so was admitted even by that firm ally of the coalowners, the Colliery Guardian. It warned the owners that they may have been overstating their case when they attributed to absenteeists such a malign and debilitating influence: "Already in some quarters," wrote its editor in April 1940, "complaints are heard that voluntary absenteeism is interfering with production, but it is not anticipated that such a problem will become as serious as it has in the past, or that it will prove insurmountable ... We have to recognise that when the workman is putting forth great efforts, which increase his earnings, there must be a natural disposition to repair his flagging energy by occasional breaks and excessive strain would only result in a fall in the man-shift output."<sup>53</sup>

The figure of annual output per person (see Table Two) is not an entirely accurate index to the efficiency of the industry or of the individual since it does not allow for the differences in the regularity of employment or the distribution of labour within the industry. Furthermore, the number of persons employed fluctuated wildly and over the period under review there were changes in the hours of work. The average yearly output per person does, however,

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53 C.G., 12.4.40.

Source: Regional Survey Report, 1946.

\* Excluding output from Government opencast workings.

TABLE TWO

OUTPUT OF SALEABLE COAL, PERSONS EMPLOYED, ETC.

Year	Output of Saleable Coal		Output South Wales as a percentage of Great Britain	Number of Persons Employed in South Wales <sup>+</sup>	Output of Coal per person per annum South Wales
	Great Britain	South Wales			
	Tons	Tons			Tons
1900 ...	225,181,300	39,328,209	17.47	147,652	266.36
1901 ...	219,046,945	39,209,260	17.90	150,394	260.71
1902 ...	227,094,042	41,305,583	18.19	154,571	267.23
1903 ...	230,334,469	42,154,191	18.30	159,161	264.85
1904 ...	232,428,272	43,730,415	18.81	163,034	268.23
1905 ...	236,128,936	43,203,071	18.30	165,609	260.87
1906 ...	251,067,628	47,056,365	18.74	174,660	269.42
1907 ...	267,830,962	49,978,211	18.66	190,603	262.21
1908 ...	261,528,795	50,227,113	19.21	201,752	248.95
1909 ...	263,774,312	50,363,937	19.09	204,984	245.70
1910 ...	264,433,028	48,699,982	18.42	213,252	228.37
1911 ...	271,891,899	50,200,727	18.46	220,887	227.27
1912 ...	260,416,338	50,116,264	19.24	225,535	222.21
1913 ...	287,430,473	56,830,317	19.77	233,800	243.07
1914 ...	265,664,393	53,879,752	20.28	234,117	230.14
1915 ...	253,206,081	50,452,600	19.93	202,655	248.96
1916 ...	256,375,366	52,080,765	20.31	214,100	243.25
1917 ...	248,499,240	48,507,965	19.52	219,718	220.77
1918 ...	227,748,654	46,716,552	20.51	218,853	213.46
1919 ...	229,779,517	47,522,306	20.68	257,163	184.79
1920 ...	229,532,081	46,248,967	20.15	271,516	170.34
1921 ...	163,251,181	30,572,003	18.73	232,215	131.65
1922 ...	249,606,864	50,325,094	20.16	243,015	207.09
1923 ...	276,000,560	54,251,587	19.66	252,909	214.51
1924 ...	267,118,167	51,085,135	19.12	250,371	204.04
1925 ...	243,176,231	44,629,522	18.35	218,053	204.67
1926 ...	126,278,521	20,272,572	16.05	217,989	93.00
1927 ...	251,232,336	46,256,363	18.41	194,260	238.12
1928 ...	237,471,931	43,311,966	18.24	168,465	257.10
1929 ...	257,906,802	48,149,613	18.67	178,530	269.70
1930 ...	243,881,824	45,107,912	18.50	172,991	260.75
1931 ...	219,458,951	37,084,852	16.90	158,271	234.31
1932 ...	208,733,140	34,874,302	16.71	145,810	239.18
1933 ...	207,112,243	34,354,884	16.59	143,014	240.22
1934 ...	220,726,298	35,173,317	15.94	139,935	251.35
1935 ...	222,248,822	35,025,110	15.76	131,855	265.63
1936 ...	228,448,356	33,886,179	14.83	126,412	268.06
1937 ...	240,409,436	37,773,013	15.71	136,088	277.56
1938 ...	227,015,308	35,292,748	15.55	136,116	259.28
1939 ...	231,350,242	35,269,149	15.24	130,954	269.32
1940 ...	224,308,699	32,351,990	14.42	130,394	248.11
1941 ...	206,354,199	27,426,377	13.29	113,990	240.60
1942 ...	203,641,904*	26,723,431	13.12	115,808	230.76
1943 ...	194,500,359*	25,115,673	12.91	116,167	216.20
1944 ...	184,114,525*	22,395,200	12.16	112,337	199.34



provide a rough index to the state of the industry since a high figure connotes a relatively satisfactory position with regard to regularity of employment and production efficiency. Conversely, a low figure is indicative of an unsatisfactory state of affairs with regard to either the regularity of employment or production efficiency, or both.

In examining the standard of production in the South Wales coalfield up to nationalisation it is necessary to treat the anthracite and steam areas as two separate entities (at this stage anyway). The average standard of production in the anthracite area was so low compared with that of the remainder of the field that the inclusion of the anthracite figures tends to give a misleading impression of the standard of production for the coalfield as a whole.<sup>54</sup>

The average output per manshift in the anthracite area on a raised and weighed basis for the week ended 28th October 1944 was 13.34 cwts compared with 18.60 cwts for the remainder of the coalfield. The average for the coalfield as a whole was 17.68.<sup>55</sup> The Regional Survey carried out for the Ministry of Fuel and Power pointed out, in 1946, that though "Comparable figures are not available for earlier periods ... it can be reasonably accepted that the difference in the standard of production has long been of the same order."<sup>56</sup>

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54 Mining Association of Great Britain "Statistical Review of the Coal Industry" Vols. 3-16. NCB Annual Reports, 1946 onwards.

55 South Wales Coalfield Regional Survey Report, HMSO 1946. (abbreviation, S.W.C.R.S.R.).

56 Ibid., p.58.

There was no single explanation for this difference in the standard of production, and, indeed, it is important not to over-generalise the area figures, because quite a number of the larger anthracite mines compared favourably, in productivity averages, with the productivity of the steam area. Compared with the bituminous area, geological conditions were generally considered to be rather more difficult. Right up to the eve of nationalisation, and beyond, progress in the mechanisation of coal-face operations was much slower than in the remainder of the coalfield.<sup>57</sup> The anthracite field was, in addition, in a relatively early stage of development even in 1946. Most of the collieries ~~being~~<sup>were</sup> worked by slants or drifts from the surface, and the average size of the mines were smaller than in the rest of the field. The proportion of face-workers was lower (38.16% in the anthracite area, compared with 43.58% in the remainder of the field in 1944).<sup>58</sup>

Difficulties arising in consequence of silicosis and pneumoconiosis were, if possible, even more evident in the anthracite area than in the remainder of the field, and the adverse effect on manpower may well have been felt earlier in the anthracite area than elsewhere.<sup>59</sup>

Over the period 1939-1943 when the demand for coal in general exceeded supply (with the exception of the latter part

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57 Ibid.

58 H.M. Inspector of Mines Reports, 1941-47.

59 Ibid.

of 1940 and early 1941, following the collapse of France) the output of the coalfield declined progressively. From 1939 to 1941 the decline was in some measure related to the reduction in manpower employed, but from 1941 to 1943 the number of wage-earners increased, and the further decline in output was due to causes other than the number (as distinct from the grades and experience) of the men employed.

Between 1939 and 1943 there was a further reduction in the number of mines producing coal, but this reduction was almost entirely due to the closure of very small mines employing less than 20 wage earners. The net result of this reduction in manpower was, therefore, a "thinning out" of labour in collieries generally, and this, in turn, involved the maintenance of an even greater excess of output capacity.<sup>60</sup>

With regard to the average size of mine, it would seem that the number of mines employing 250 or more wage earners was 155 both in 1938 and 1943, but meanwhile the average annual output per mine fell from 209,200 tons to 148,400 tons.

It was estimated by the Ministry of Fuel and Power Surveyors in 1946 that the annual output capacity of the collieries in production in 1938 had been approximately 53 million tons.<sup>61</sup> The output raised and weighed in that year was 38 million tons which meant that the excess capacity maintained by the industry was approximately 40%.<sup>62</sup> Special returns rendered by colliery

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60 See above, Chapter 2, pp.

61 S.W.C.R.S.R., p.64.

62 Ibid.

companies to the Ministry of Fuel and Power Surveyors in 1946 showed that the annual output capacities of collieries actually in production in January 1945 had amounted to 51 million tons. The output raised and weighed in 1944 was 25 million tons, and the excess capacity carried by the industry in collieries in production was, therefore, in the order of 100%.<sup>63</sup> (In addition, there was the output of collieries temporarily closed and available for re-opening which was about 1.4 million tons).

Some indication of the extent to which the efficiency of production was impaired due to the maintenance of excess capacity during the years after 1938 can be gained by examining the following figures:

The output raised and weighed in 1938 was 38,187,200 tons and in 1944 was 25,038,200 tons, a reduction of 34.4%.

The average number of wage earners employed on the surface in 1938 was 21,173 and in 1944 was 20,855, a reduction of only 1.5%.<sup>64</sup>

The total length of roadways in use below ground was 2,376 miles in 1938 and 2,333 miles in 1944, a reduction of only 1.8%.<sup>65</sup>

The inference to be drawn from these facts is that despite the much lower output obtained in 1944, practically the same number of men were necessarily engaged on the surface and on roadway maintenance and haulage work below ground as were required to produce the much larger output in 1938.

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63 Ibid.

64 H.M. Inspector of Mines Reports, 1939 and 1945.

65 Supplement to Ministry of Fuel and Power Statistical Digest, HMSO, 1947.

Clearly, the huge problem of coalfield re-organisation was far from being the only one which pre-occupied the controllers of coal production in the decade before nationalisation. The actual means of production itself, at colliery and face level, needed urgent re-examination. In a section entitled "The Conditions of Success", in their 1945 Report on Coal Mining, the Technical Advisory Committee to the Ministry of Fuel and Power<sup>66</sup> argued that the new mechanised production methods which they recommended were vitally important to the well-being of the future coal industry, and that these new methods must be accepted by the labour force along with severe "rationalisation" of numbers employed at the collieries:

"On the workmen and their leaders, too, falls a grave responsibility. They must combine with the mining engineer in an entirely new spirit of co-operation for a united effort to raise the productivity of the Industry to the highest possible level, and be ready to accept the obligations, as well as claim the rights ... In particular, they must accept the need for a high standard of workmanship; they must welcome the introduction of machinery and do their utmost to see that it is made to give the greatest possible yield. They must recognise that the existing level of wages cannot be maintained without a large increase in output per manshift for all employed; that men will have to be transferred from one mine to another, and, in some cases, even from one district to another; that double-shift working will very generally be essential; and, finally, that an industry, rebuilt in the way we have suggested, cannot be expected to provide employment for anything approaching the number of unskilled men who are, at present, dependent upon it."

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66 The Committee was, in fact, made up of acting, or former Managing Directors of large private coal companies: C.C. Reid of Fife Coal Co., H.J. Crofts of Chatterley-Whitfield Collieries Ltd., D.A. Hann of P.D., J. Hunter of Doncaster Amalgamated, A. Kirkup of Lambton, Hetton & Joicey Collieries Ltd., J.A. Nimmo of United Steel and H.W. Smith of Hardwick Colliery Co. Ltd.

Despite the implication of the T.A. Committee's report, the SWMF had never opposed mechanization per se. Horner, for one, extolled the virtues of mechanization on many occasions, both before and after nationalization. In January 1945, for example, he announced that he had been "greatly impressed" by the efficiency of the American coal industry during his visit to the United States earlier that winter. The Americans, he said, had arrived at the only possible solution to the man-power problem of the mining industry, and one "which we should be compelled to adopt in this country if our industry is to continue to exist - the introduction of widespread mechanization."<sup>67</sup> He went on to argue that the "unskilled drudgery connected with the miners' work, such as the unnecessary shovelling of coal which (could) be done much better by machines than by men, had to be got rid of."

In the main, opposition to mechanization, where it existed, stemmed from the workforce's experience of inter-war depression and unemployment - when the introduction of a machine meant, very often, the enforced lay-offs of numbers of workers whose previous tasks were rendered unnecessary by the new development. Horner, dealing with this problem, claimed that the American miner "regarded the machine as his friend, whereas the British miner regarded it as his enemy and associated the introduction of labour-saving machines with unemployment."<sup>68</sup>

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67 C.G., 26.1.45.

68 Ibid.

For a number of reasons which will be discussed later, the coalowners had shown no great enthusiasm towards the prospect of a fully-mechanized coal industry in South Wales. Sir D.R. Llewellyn, as early as 1906, had pioneered the use of electrically-driven coal-cutters at his Windber collieries near Aberdare,<sup>69</sup> but his example was followed more slowly in South Wales than in other British coalfields. The proportion of output machine-cut on the coalfield remained, throughout the whole of the period 1918-1946, considerably lower than the average for Great Britain and the proportion conveyed, after reaching the average for the country as a whole in 1930, gradually fell behind. The reasons put forward for the retarded rate of mechanization varied from claims that physical conditions in this coalfield were generally less favourable for mechanization than in other coalfields to complaints from owners that they encountered extreme difficulty when attempting to fix new price lists for revised methods of working.<sup>70</sup>

Figure 1 and Table 3, below, trace the proportions of output machine cut and conveyed in South Wales from 1930 to 1944.

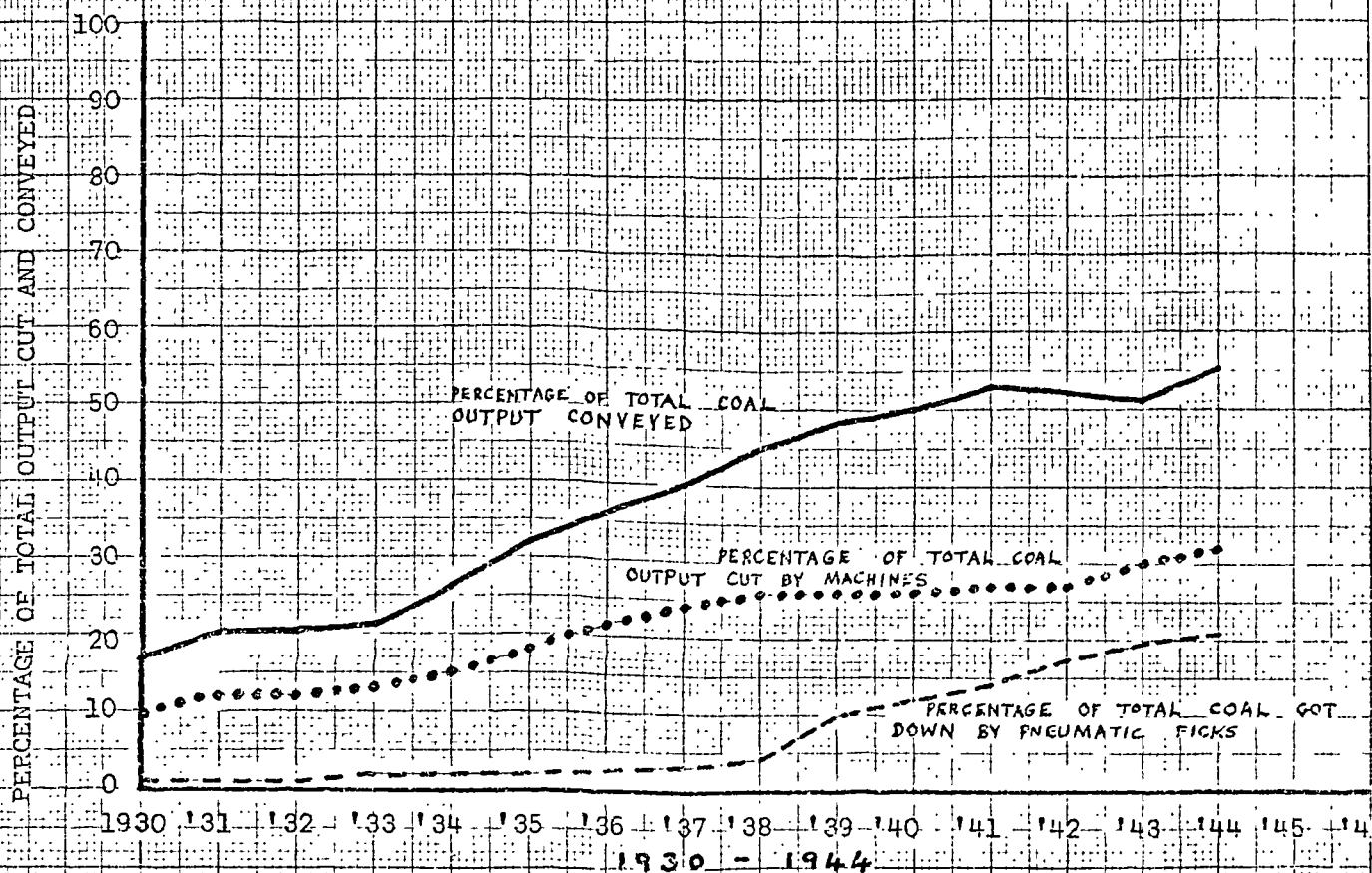
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69 Obituary of Sir D.R. Llewellyn, in C.G., 20.12.40.

70 See Bert Coombes, "These Poor Hands", pp. 116-117.

FIGURE 1

PROPORTIONS OF OUTPUT MACHINE CUT  
AND CONVEYED IN SOUTH WALES  
FROM 1930 TO 1944.



Source: Figures obtained from South Wales Coalfield Regional Report, 1946.



TABLE THREE

NUMBER OF MINES UNDER THE COAL MINES ACT AT WHICH COAL-CUTTING MACHINES WERE IN USE, NUMBER OF MACHINES USED AND THE QUANTITY AND PERCENTAGE OF COAL CUT FROM 1930 TO 1944.

Year	No. of Mines using Machines	No. of Machines in use	Quantity of Coal cut Tons	Percentage of Total Output cut
1930 ... ..	94	460	4,328,714	10
1931 ... ..	97	484	4,355,741	12
1932 ... ..	99	437	4,092,932	12
1933 ... ..	100	454	4,402,169	13
1934 ... ..	109	472	5,235,056	15
1935 ... ..	107	476	6,338,358	18
1936 ... ..	102	482	7,151,019	21
1937 ... ..	114	519	9,151,252	24
1938 ... ..	118	535	9,182,970	26
1939 ... ..	112	548	9,212,518	26
1940 ... ..	118	500	8,572,442	26
1941 ... ..	100	489	7,364,226	27
1942 ... ..	107	495	7,301,725	27
1943 ... ..	114	573	7,612,519	30
1944 ... ..	117	608	7,065,183	32

Source: South Wales Coalfield Regional Report, 1946.

It will be seen that the proportion of output cut by machines increased <sup>from</sup> ~~by~~ 10% in 1930 to 32% in 1944. The quantity and proportion of coal machine cut increased rapidly between 1932 and 1937 and continued to increase, although much less rapidly in 1938/39. Meanwhile the number of machines in use increased progressively but not in direct proportion. From 1939 to 1941 there was a rapid decline in the numbers of machines in use and in the tonnage cut, although the proportion of output machine-cut increased slightly. The installation of additional machines in 1942/44 succeeded in reversing the trend and in sharply increasing the proportion cut. Further analysis of figures shows that the average quantity cut per machine per annum increased from 9,000 to 18,000 tons between 1932 and 1937 and then fell each year until it reached less than 12,000 tons in 1944. It is difficult to account for this downward trend in the quantity cut per machine from 1938. It may have been due, initially, to the application of machines to shorter faces and to thinner and otherwise less productive seams.

The rise in productivity-per-machine between 1932 and 1937 indicates that both managers and men were gaining experience and skill in the utilization of production machinery - qualities which previously they almost certainly had lacked, simply because of the dearth of machines and the general lack of investment by colliery owners in the techniques and hardware associated with

mechanized mining. For their part, the miners tended to explain the apparent reticence of the coalowners to invest in sophisticated machinery in terms of a simple equation. Such investment was low, they argued, because cheap labour was plentiful and often badly organized. It is a theory which is far from difficult to justify.

If, for instance, one examines which particular mechanized techniques the South Wales Coalowners eventually favoured, one finds it hard to escape the conclusion that the choices were made with a great deal more in mind than merely raising productivity by the most efficient means possible. Figure One, page 294, illustrates the increasing emphasis placed upon the use of pneumatic picks at the coal face: the percentage of total output brought down by this method rose from just under one per cent in 1930 to over 20 per cent in 1944. Table Four, below, records that the numbers of such picks in use increased over ten-fold in fifteen years; some were employed on faces cut by machine, but the majority were installed as an alternative to machine-cutting.<sup>71</sup>

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71 S.W.C.R.S.R., p.65.

TABLE FOUR

NUMBER OF PNEUMATIC PICKS FOR GETTING DOWN COAL,  
QUANTITY OF COAL GOT AND THE PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL  
OUTPUT OBTAINED FROM 1930 TO 1944.

Year	No. of Pneumatic Picks in Use for Coal-Getting	Quantity of Coal Got Tons	Percentage of Total Output Obtained
1930 ... ..	356	241,662	0.54
1931 ... ..	357	318,928	0.86
1932 ... ..	313	251,219	0.72
1933 ... ..	499	553,309	1.61
1934 ... ..	487	486,059	1.38
1935 ... ..	574	511,368	1.46
1936 ... ..	656	651,305	1.92
1937 ... ..	816	918,850	2.43
1938 ... ..	1,485	1,468,781	4.16
1939 ... ..	2,456	3,382,356	9.59
1940 ... ..	2,993	3,941,239	12.18
1941 ... ..	3,229	3,951,522	14.41
1942 ... ..	3,556	4,581,116	17.14
1943 ... ..	3,615	4,881,027	19.43
1944 ... ..	3,868	4,648,823	20.76

Source: South Wales Coalfield Regional Report, 1946.

The advantages accruing to a coalowner as a result of his adoption of pneumatic picks as a mechanization technique, as opposed to those which might accrue, for example, from the adoption of powered cutter/loaders, were fairly obvious. A coalface worked by men equipped with such picks was, in theory at least, far less susceptible to arbitrary stoppages enforced by its workforce than one equipped with machinery which involved the comparatively sophisticated degree of teamwork necessary to complete the cyclical operations by which, for example, coal is won using a powered cutter/loader. The face team possesses, in its collective skill, a degree of bargaining strength not available to individual face workers. Thus, a collier bringing down coal by means of a pneumatic pick could, theoretically, be replaced should he be absent ~~himself~~ for any reason from his "place" at the coalface. Such replacements were not, however, as readily available where more sophisticated machinery was involved and there was considerably more financial and insurance risk involved in placing a powered cutter/loader in the hands of "green" labour, or in the hands of replacement face workers inexperienced in machine mining techniques, than in equipping such individuals with pneumatic picks and broad shovels.

The popularity of this type of pick as an investment by coalowners seems to have been a major contributing factor to the continuance in South Wales of what could be called "grading" disputes amongst workers at the coalface - disputes which occurred with a regularity missing or declining in incidence on more mechanized fields. The records of the Joint Standing

Disputes Committees, for example, both during and after the war years, are cluttered with cases involving claims made by individual miners or groups of miners to the effect that they were either removed from, or failed to receive, productive positions at the coalface. The high incidence of such cases reflects the continuance of the sense of mistrust with which many South Wales miners viewed management's attempts to mechanize. Miners were very much aware that, in a situation where management were unwilling, or unable, to invest in machinery other than the pneumatic pick, reallocation of labour at the face was an inevitable occurrence if management were to assure that those individuals employed in bringing down the coal were the most productive workers available. (i.e. the strongest, most durable and most "ready and willing"<sup>72</sup>). Indeed, reallocation was seen, in many pits, as constituting perhaps the most potent and consistent single method of "speed-up" in the manager's repertoire and was generally combatted by the workforce through the use of its most effective method of defence, namely, the imposition of the Seniority Rule. Long after nationalisation, the coalfaces of South Wales, and particularly

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72 Bert Coombes, in "These Poor Hands", cites the introduction by management (onto a new face) of what were known by the men as "Dai full-pelts" - individuals "who knew no better" and who would work flat out in the initial weeks whilst a price list was being negotiated, thus setting output targets which were often beyond the capacity of many older face workers and which stretched to the limit even those men who were in the prime of their lives. (See esp. Chapter 7, "These Poor Hands", Left Book Club, 1939, for an unrivalled description of "speed up" and mechanization in a Welsh mine).

those in the western steam and anthracite areas, continued to witness the practice of such customs - devised, as they had been in the past, by the workforce to regulate and protect its interests. The Seniority Rule and the Stint were to prove remarkably adaptable to faces at which the coal was won by the use of pneumatic picks. Indeed, this "transitionary" form of mechanization could be said to have provided, where it was needed, a bridge across which Welsh miners were enabled to drag their protective/restrictive customs from the era of hand-getting to that of powered production.<sup>73</sup>

There existed, then, a marked difference in some important quarters between individual colliery lodges and the mineworkers' elected executive in their respective attitudes towards mechanization. Horner's guarded enthusiasm for the introduction of machines which would alleviate the drudgery involved in the coalminer's work was opposed by large sections of his union's membership - especially in the western steam and anthracite areas - who viewed each successive mechanical development with deep suspicion and mistrust. It was a difference which was consciously played down by Horner even after the invasion of the Soviet Union by Nazi Germany had caused the Communist militants on the coalfield to throw their weight behind the government's productivity drives. He recognized, quite clearly,

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73 As late as 1976, the management at Fernhill Colliery in Rhondda Fawr, for instance, bemoaned the survival in that pit of the Seniority Rule and blamed its continued operation as the largest single contributory factor to the retarded state of mechanization (and particularly of power-loading) at Fernhill. The colliery had experienced large scale use of pneumatic picks since 1941.

the emotive nature of the subject. Mechanization had been associated in the minds of most South Wales miners with the advance of the great combine coal companies, and in particular with Powell Duffryn, Ocean, and Amalgamated Anthracite - companies which, as we have seen, led the field in challenging the traditional customs and practices of the workforce.

More importantly, however, he recognized that the workforce did not oppose, in principle at least, the prospect of (even) complete mechanization - provided the conditions and the wages accompanying it were commensurate with the increased output and intensity of work involved: conditions which the workforce, like Horner, envisaged occurring in Britain only after nationalisation. This fact was also recognised and understood by the owners: Szarvasy, for example, the Chairman of Amalgamated Anthracite, informed his company's shareholders in 1945 that "The miners so far had shown no inclination to compromise on any important point;" (including mechanization) "to them nationalization had become almost a religion, and it had become abundantly clear that they would not give of their 'best' or even 'second or third best' except under national ownership of the mines."<sup>74</sup>

Despite their failure to reverse the overall decline in production in South Wales, the solutions proposed by the controllers of the combine companies served to alter quite radically some of the most basic of the Welsh industry's characteristics. Table 2 (page 286) illustrates the changes in pit size and the tendency

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<sup>74</sup> C.G., 12.10.45.



to centralize production which occurred during the inter-war years and Table 3 the relatively slow introduction into these pits of coal cutting machinery. Much more impressive was the rate of introduction of coal conveyors, though even here it is important to note that most of these conveyors were ones employed to convey coal either along side roads or main haulage roads.<sup>75</sup> Table 5 shows the number of mines in which conveyors and loaders were in use, the number of these machines in use and the quantity and proportion of coal conveyed.

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75 Margot Heinemann, *op.cit.*, p.89.

TABLE FIVE

COAL CONVEYED BY MACHINERY

The Number of Mines under the Coal Mines Act at which Conveyors and Loaders were in use; the number of Conveyors and Loaders used and the Quantity and Proportion of Coal Conveyed from 1930 to 1944.

Year	No. of Mines at which Machines were in use	No. of Machines in Use		Quantity of coal Conveyed Tons	Percentage of total Coal Output Conveyed
		Conveyors	Loaders		
1930 ... ..	87	973	5	7,804,660	17
1931 ... ..	94	932	16	7,346,856	20
1932 ... ..	88	875	10	6,990,962	20
1933 ... ..	84	937	9	7,284,241	21
1934 ... ..	96	966	19	9,000,533	26
1935 ... ..	111	1,052	18	11,048,848	32
1936 ... ..	110	1,063	19	12,263,303	36
1937 ... ..	122	1,207	30	15,092,425	40
1938 ... ..	123	1,306	36	15,844,651	45
1939 ... ..	119	1,384	45	17,056,920	48
1940 ... ..	120	1,401	48	16,051,672	50
1941 ... ..	113	1,301	44	14,401,835	53
1942 ... ..	117	1,328	32	13,912,028	52
1943 ... ..)	see below				
1944 ... ..)					

Year	No. of Mines at which Machines were in use	No. of Machines in use			Quantity of Coal Conveyed			Percentage of Total Output Conveyed
		Conveyors	Gate-end Loaders	Power Loaders*	Hand-Loaded on to Conveyors Tons	Power-Loaded on to Conveyors Tons	Total Conveyed Tons	
1943	126	1,426	27	6	12,807,242	13,647	12,820,889	51
1944	127	1,465	18	5	12,372,335	11,093	12,383,428	55

\* Not collected separately prior to the year 1943.

Source : South Wales Coalfield Regional Report, 1946.

The quantity of coal conveyed, after falling slightly in 1931/32, increased rapidly until 1939 and then declined rapidly to 1944. The proportion of output conveyed, however, increased almost continuously from 17% in 1930 to 53% in 1944. It should be noted that while the quantity and proportion of coal conveyed decreased over 1942/43, the number of conveyors in use increased appreciably. The average quantity of coal conveyed per machine per annum increased consistently from less than 8,000 tons in 1932 to a maximum of 13,000 tons in 1937. Thereafter it decreased year by year to the level of 8,000 tons in 1944. It is probable that this downward trend from 1938 was due initially to the application of conveyors to shorter faces and less productive seams, to the greater use of gate conveyors and to the fairly rapid extension of conveying in the anthracite area, where the average quantity conveyed per machine was very low.<sup>76</sup>

Once again, however, much contemporary emphasis by coalowners and government production offices<sup>r</sup> alike was laid upon the effects of absenteeism.<sup>77</sup> The successful application of coal face machinery very largely depended upon the completion of a cycle of operations to a definite time schedule: "Every day was an emergency.", recalled the operator of a face-cutter. "The officials would be behind the colliers all day hurrying them to clear the coal, else they would delay the machine, then they would hurry back to warn us (the cutter operators) to hurry up, or the colliers would be clear and

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<sup>76</sup> Supplement to the M of F & P, "Statistical Digest", 1947.

<sup>77</sup> See the Report of the Technical Advisory Committee, Cmd.6610, 1945.

waiting for coal. That was the way of it every day - rush us up to the colliers, and rush them so that they should not delay us."<sup>78</sup>

It was the usual practice to have one coal-filling shift and two shifts devoted to the work preparatory to coal-filling, that is, cutting, packing, ripping, moving conveyors forward, etc... The three shifts would make up the 24 hour cycle. If the completion of any one operation was delayed owing to a factor such as, say, absenteeism, the whole cycle was delayed and there was sometimes a loss of output quite out of proportion to the absenteeism which caused it. For example, the absence of one man, such as a coal-cutter operator, may have resulted in the loss of a full-day's output from a face yielding a considerable tonnage. The increasing weekend absenteeism rate, in particular, was regarded as extremely damaging, since it inevitably delayed coal-filling on a Monday morning.<sup>79</sup>

In general, however, the rate of absenteeism at the coal face was lower in South Wales than the average for Great Britain as a whole, and this had been so for some years before the outbreak of war. Whilst the Yorkshire coalfield, for instance, had a rate of absenteeism as high as 11.9% in September 1925, the South Wales figure for the same date was 8.2 and the British average, 8.9%.<sup>80</sup>

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78 B.L. Coombes, op.cit, p.113.

79 Report of the Technical Advisory Committee, 1945, p.67.

80 Mining Association of Great Britain, "Statistical Review of the Coal Industry", vols. 3-16.

The percentage dropped dramatically in all areas after the defeat of 1926. Yorkshire saw a drop from the April 1926 total of 11.87% to 9.8% in February 1927. The South Wales figure dropped from 8.3% to 5.7% over the same period. Absenteeism "recovered" its 1925 level in some areas, including Yorkshire where it passed the 1925 figure, by February 1929. This was not the case in South Wales, however, where the percentage had remained below six per cent from the end of the lockout through 1927/28 when it rose to 6.6% and remained there or thereabouts until it declined through 1931 and 1932 to reach an inter-war "low" of 4.7% throughout the period April/July 1932. A similar pattern can be traced in other coalfields.<sup>81</sup> They all (including South Wales) saw a dramatic upsurge of absenteeism in the first quarter of 1933, followed by an equally dramatic decline to a trough in mid-1933 from which the absenteeism rate climbed gradually to new peaks during 1937/38 before declining during the latter part of 1938 and rising once again into 1939. The Yorkshire percentage in 1939 hovered between 10 and 11 per cent; the average for the country as a whole stood at about 8.5% whilst the South Wales figure was around the 7.6 mark. By 1946 the rates for most areas had effectively doubled. The Yorkshire figure was now 23.54, the East Midlands, 23.24, the West Midlands 24.83, Great Britain 19.32% - a figure made relatively low by the "moderate" percentages of the Scottish and South Wales districts which stood at 14.51 and 17.38% respectively.<sup>82</sup>

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81 See Figure Two, page 308.

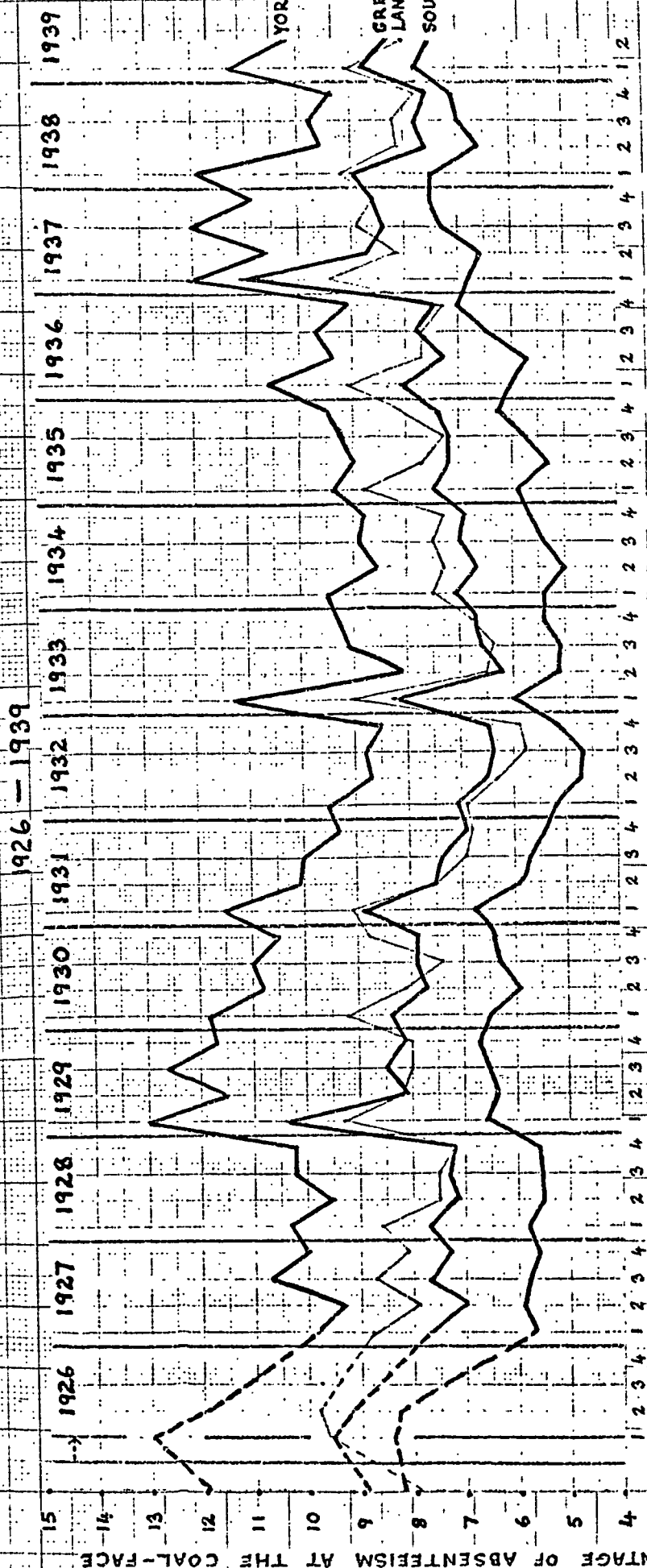
82 Mining Association of Great Britain, "Statistical Review of the Coal Industry", vols. 3-16.

FIG. 2  
PERCENTAGE  
OF ABSENTEEISM  
AT THE  
COAL-  
FACE  
1926~1939.

S. WALES  
YORKSHIRE  
LANCASHIRE  
GREAT BRITAIN

**YORKSHIRE**

GREAT BRITAIN  
LANCASHIRE  
SOUTH WALES



JAN - MAR  
 APR - JUNE  
 JULY - SEPT.  
 OCT - DEC.

SOURCE: MINING ASSOC. OF GREAT BRITAIN, "STATISTICAL REVIEW OF THE COAL INDUSTRY," VOL. 2-12.

In the view of the more "advanced" coalowners and of the Chairman of the Government's Coal Production Council, Lord Portal, the most likely means envisaged during the early years of the war of achieving a cutback in absenteeism, "apart from the impact of public opinion," lay in entrusting the task "to the men's leaders and to the pit committees being set up at the collieries to deal with this problem."<sup>83</sup> A little cold water was thrown over this proposal, however, by the editor of the Colliery Guardian who, when commenting upon Portal's theories, reminded his readers that "... it should be recalled that in 1916 the absenteeism committees which were set up at nearly all the collieries were seriously hampered by the absence of authority and punitive powers."<sup>84</sup>

And therein lay the rub in 1940. To award new powers which would serve only to strengthen the committees' authority to discipline absenteeists, and not to strengthen the arms of those of the workmen's representatives who sought to obtain for their men a greater say all round, (in the way in which individual pits were run) was likely to prove highly unpopular amongst the rank and file and, consequently, a source of potential embarrassment to the Government. For there was a problem bedevilling both the pit production committees and the industry as a whole which was infinitely more injurious to the cause of increasing productivity than that created by the committees' alleged lack of "authority and punitive powers". That, of course, was the lack of trust and will-to-co-operate which existed generally between men and management throughout the industry.

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83 C.G., 10.5.40.

84 Ibid.

This mistrust displayed itself as frequently, if not more frequently, in the actions and expressed opinions of management as in those of the men. In some districts, coalowners and pit managers refused quite openly to partake in any way in the activities of the pit production committees - especially after the committees were elevated from their lowly "absenteeist tribunal" roles which they had occupied, albeit unofficially, until the publication of the White Paper in June 1942.<sup>85</sup> In South Wales, the coalfield's Colliery Managers' Association decided that its members should refuse to attend P.P.C. meetings at all and it agreed to participate only after it had received a guarantee from the Ministry that mine managers alone would retain full responsibility for safety in individual mines.<sup>86</sup>

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85 The powers and status of P.P.C.s were not defined in detail in the White Paper of June 1942, but its publication was part of a fresh drive to rescue the P.P.C.s from being merely absenteeism tribunals and to re-establish them on a new basis. A model constitution, agenda and fortnightly report form for reports to the Controller was issued by the Ministry and adopted, with some variations, in the districts. The new constitution laid down that specific cases of absenteeism were not to be dealt with by the committee and concentrated far more on providing some basis for co-operation on matters of production. Especially important was the point that "the Committee as a whole should be kept informed by the management at regular intervals of the technical aspects of the present working, future planning and development of the pit." Quoted in M. Heinemann, op.cit., p.144.

86 Colliery Guardian, 9.10.42. Quoted in M. Heinemann, op.cit. p.150.



The managers expressed great concern over what they understood to be an erosion of their disciplinary powers as a result of the introduction by the Government of the Essential Work Order in May 1941. The Order had guaranteed the miner security of position and a weekly minimum wage for the duration of the national emergency. Managers and Owners saw this as an open encouragement to their employees to challenge the industrial status quo. There existed, for the first time in twenty years, what amounted to guaranteed full employment, and it seemed, to many miners, that their opportunity had arrived to "make the enemy run."<sup>87</sup>

The Order had included the payment of one shilling a day good attendance bonus with penalties for absenteeism - an arrangement which was soon altered as a result of a storm of protest from miners' representatives. The penalties were abolished and the bonus accepted as a "straight" wages advance. Iestyn Williams, the Joint Secretary of the Coal Owners' Association, described the alteration as an event which "undermined one of the props set up by the owners to reinforce the Essential Work Order and to put a premium on attendance."<sup>88</sup> It was, he claimed, "the old subterfuge of calling a bonus a penalty, if the bonus was not paid,"<sup>89</sup> and he went on to attack the E.W.O. in general, arguing that although it had, to a great degree, stemmed the flow of labour away from the pits, it was, nevertheless, being by-passed by "the use of a medical certificate as a trick for getting out of the industry..."<sup>90</sup>

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87 A. Calder, op.cit., p.505.

88 C.G., 31.10.41.

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

Despite the protestations of owners and management, however, it seems certain that the attendance bonus scheme failed in its overall objective (which was, of course, to raise productivity and production in general). From its introduction, in the middle of 1941, to the following September, the weekly output in South Wales, instead of increasing under the incentive of this 1s bonus, actually declined to 6 per cent less than the output when it was introduced and to 12½% below the original target figure.<sup>91</sup>

The most uncom<sup>on</sup>prising of the Coalowners' spokesmen blamed the decline squarely upon the introduction of the EWO and its alleged encouragement of rank-and-file dissent and indiscipline: "... there is not the slightest doubt," wrote one such individual in the Western Mail in May 1942, that "the cause is due to the effects of the Essential Work Order, and the high wages paid in the Royal Ordnance Factories."<sup>92</sup> (The writer's reference to the high wages paid at the ROFs were by way of an explanation for the continuance of absenteeism. The miner, he argued, was more inclined to work one or two shifts less per week if his wife or daughter was supplementing the household income with her factory earnings). Echoing the time-old remedy of Welsh coalowners for such maladies, he suggested measures to increase pit discipline and "to increase the working time and cut out all this cackle about rationing. Increase each shift by an hour a day, except the Saturday day-shift..."<sup>93</sup>

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91 Ibid., 2.1.42.

92 Quoted in the C.G., 8.5.42.; the writer was the consulting engineer, John Kane, who was closely connected with, amongst other firms, Powell Duffryn.

93 Ibid.

The SWMF answered such proposals by forwarding to the MFGB Executive Committee a demand for a flat-rate increase of two shillings per shift, in order that miners might have some worthwhile incentive to aim for.<sup>94</sup> Horner, emphasised that Welsh production remained static, or declined, because (a) manpower was inadequate; (b) miners were "treated unfairly"; (c) there was no national planning; (d) no form of unification, and (e) no authority capable of pursuing a policy of planned production. The only answer, he argued, was complete nationalisation.<sup>95</sup>

The intractability of these opposing viewpoints reflected itself time and again throughout the war in the discussions, arguments and debates (on how best to improve the industry's performance) which took place both at the pit heads and in Parliament. In June 1942, the Commons grudgingly approved the Government's proposals to set up a National Coal Board - though James Maxton's amendment calling for immediate nationalisation was defeated by a majority of 321. The White Paper, in which the proposals were set out, was a compromise. As the Colliery Guardian's editor observed, "... miners, coal owners, and even consumers can all find something in it to please them."<sup>96</sup>

The MFGB immediately submitted eight amendments to the Bill. They restated their demand for complete nationalisation, advocated that provision be made to compensate for the social consequences of concentration of production; demanded that

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94 SWMF Executive Committee Minutes, 5.5.42.

95 SWMF Annual Conference Report, 1942.

96 C.G., 19.6.42.

provision be made for arbitration in disputes between a Regional Controller and a Regional Coal Board; demanded that measures be made to free the manager from all responsibility to his employers and to ensure that PPCs had a definite say in the management of pits; they required that the manager at each pit should be the "responsible person" to receive instructions from the Regional Controller and that it be ensured that the pit production committees received copies of all orders given by the Controller to a manager.<sup>97</sup>

The last four amendments posed the most serious threats of all to the continuance of the status quo - save, of course, the amendment which demanded complete nationalisation. They challenged the accepted prerogative of the coal-owner, or of his agent, to interfere in matters of production inside individual pits and, at the same time, emphasised that if the necessary increases in production were to materialise, then management must perforce compromise and allow a measure of debate regarding the formulation of important decisions within pits. In other words, the amendments challenged that brand of autocratic managerial technique which so many employees had experienced in South Wales, as in most other coalfields, during the years of depression.

In as sympathetic a fashion as it was able, without wholly alienating the Mineworkers' Federation, the Government were advising the Mineowners to tread carefully. Managers, however, were treated somewhat less tenderly and they found to their dismay

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97 Ibid.

that their position had been rendered more delicate and uncertain than previously. Except in regard to the statutory duties affecting safety, they were faced with the prospect of operating under an ineluctable dyarchy. As Jim Griffiths, MP, pointed out during the Bill's debate, the manager, from the inception of "dual control" onwards, was liable to be dismissed by both Coalowners and Regional Controllers, and fears were expressed by the Managers' Association that its members might well become whipping boys who would be made to "answer for their employers' misdeeds, in the front trench of any hostile engagement between the Ministry and an owner."<sup>98</sup>

The managers expressed their anger at what they saw as a complete erosion of their powers. They regarded themselves as being "at the bidding" of pit production committees and of the National Service Officers<sup>99</sup> and thus "at the mercy of the men whose activities they (were) supposed to govern." A manager, they complained, despite the fact that he was still being held responsible for the performance and safety of his mine, could "dismiss an employee today only for misconduct, but even then his decision (could) be over-ruled." They felt themselves "stripped of every vestige of authority" and declared that in their present circumstances they were enabled to "hold onto leadership ... only by personality."<sup>100</sup>

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98 Ibid.

99 Western Mail, 11.10.43.; quoted in M. Heinemann, op.cit., pp. 149-150.

100 Ibid.

Sir Evan Williams enlarged upon these complaints in a speech delivered in May, 1942, to the annual meeting of the Mining Association of Great Britain. He informed his audience that, "On the labour side, the problems of management have increased in difficulty during the past 12 months and a serious loss of production still occurs through irregularity of attendance on the part of a section of workers - chiefly amongst the younger and less responsibly minded men - and which the machinery of the Essential Work Order has been quite inadequate to cope with."<sup>101</sup>

Sir Evan expressed his belief that it would call for "close collaboration" between mineowners and Miners' Federations in order that such problems be solved: "collaboration" would, he claimed, "yield valuable results."<sup>102</sup>

A policy of "collaboration" was being proposed with equal optimism by the representatives of Labour. Sir Stafford Cripps, the Lord Privy Seal, for example, informed a Mountain Ash audience of miners in June 1942 that, "Never before had the miners been invited to take so large a part in the running of their own industry", and he was confident, he claimed, that once given the opportunity the miners would prove to "any who might doubt it the enormous value of their participation."<sup>103</sup> The permanence of nationalisation, (i.e. after the war) "or the application of some more extensive form of control ... would be far more likely

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101 C.G., 22.5.42.

102 Ibid.

103 Aberdare Leader, 19.6.42.

if the miners ... proved the success of the present scheme." He hoped "profoundly" that the present scheme would produce the "improved result in the industry" for which they looked.<sup>104</sup>

The "present scheme" was, in fact, hopelessly inadequate and unimaginative. The extent and quality of the miners' participation in managerial affairs was generally minimal and usually of a purely advisory nature. That this was so did not, however, prevent leading politicians and trade-unionists like Cripps, Lawther and Horner from using the "advances" gained by the Act as carrots with which to tempt and cajole the workforce towards attaining higher productivity. "Show the country that you are worthy of her trust", argued Cripps, "and she will reward you with nationalisation." Here were the first murmurings of the slogan "Make Nationalisation Work", which was destined to be uttered in the immediate post-war years by every Labour politician, every NCB public relations officer and almost every NUM official whenever industrial dissent threatened to upset the "co-operative" boat.

Cripps could hardly have chosen a more timely moment upon which to disclose to the public the general feelings of his Party's Executive regarding the form which a future, nationalised, coal industry might take, for within days of his speech, the future Chairman of the National Coal Board, Lord Hyndley, announced the "forfeiture" of his Welsh colliery interests - including, of course,

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104 Ibid.

his directorship of Powell Duffryn - in order that he might take up his duties as Controller General of the Mines Department - a position invested with new and broader powers under the Government's Coal Bill and one which was to provide Hyndley with ample opportunities to rehearse for his major role as the NCB's first supremo.

Here, then, was Cripps, as early as June 1942, defending a prototype of Labour's limp blue-print for the country's future coal industry. Here were superficially broad but highly unimaginative reforms masterminded by two agents palpably unenthusiastic regarding the prospect of revolutionary social and industrial changes: the Labour Party Executive, which was proving itself time and again during the war to be lukewarm at best towards even the most limited of socialist proposals,<sup>105</sup> and Lord Hyndley, borrowed as he was from a coal combine hardly renowned for its generosity and sympathy towards the welfare and aspirations of its workforce. Even this early, the writing upon the wall predicted quite clearly that the Coal Board would emerge in South Wales as a "Powell Duffryn Product" (as the coalfield's workforce was later to refer to it) and one which was to be promoted and blessed at each turn by the majority of the mineworkers' Executive Council.

The projections were blessed with verve and wit, for example,

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105 R. Miliband, "Parliamentary Socialism", London 1973, pp.279-280.



by Will Lawther who, at the 1942 Annual Conference of the MFGB, castigated those who demanded from the Government "too much, too soon", for such demands were, in 1942, crimes as large in his and Cripps' eyes as they were to be in 1947. In the first of many such speeches, he ridiculed those amongst the miners who were, as political "idealists", clamouring for changes which he considered too revolutionary and, as such, "unreasonable": "... The first steps have been taken to carry through in a practical form the ideals the miners had urged at many an annual conference. Miners preferred those practical steps in cash to the tap-dancing of the intellectuals on the ideological <sup>t</sup>saircases."<sup>106</sup>

It was not the light, syncopated, sounds of intellectuals dancing on the stairs which disturbed the fragile industrial peace as much as the thump of work-boots marching away from failed pit production committee meetings.

The meetings were, in many places, doomed from their inception by the attitude of managers and owners. An example of the latter's hostility was recorded in the Western Mail in 1943. It quotes an "agent for a number of collieries" as saying "My company has advised managers to meet the men with every consideration, so as to secure their co-operation and to avoid stoppages in these crucial times. As far as I can see the policy generally is to humour the men in every way. How far this is wise remains to be seen. We know by now what appeasement comes to."<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> MFGB Annual Conference Report, 1942.

<sup>107</sup> Western Mail, 11.10.43.

That this type of attitude was general is hardly in doubt: Horner, for example, informed the TUC at Blackpool in September 1942, that the greatest problem facing miners on PPCs was to "convince managements that workmen could inform them in matters on which they considered themselves to be the only experts. It was regrettable", continued Horner, "that managements with the best intentions in the world often regarded it as a reflection upon themselves that workers were able to advise methods which they had not thought of."<sup>108</sup>

Allegations were made that the group offices of colliery companies were interfering with decisions reached after full discussion at meetings of PPCs, and in some instances were vetoing them. The SWMF Executive considered this interference to be a gross impediment to production and called upon the MFCB to demand that colliery managers be freed so that they would be outside the influence of the colliery companies and directed, instead, by the Regional Coal Board.<sup>109</sup>

Complaints such as these were countered in the press by the owners' representatives and spokesmen. For example, Mr. T.R. Tallis, colliery agent to Aneurin Bevan's old opponents, the Tredegar Iron and Coal Co. Ltd., cited the following examples of what he termed as "sabotage" ... "deliberately-made difficulties with which the company had had to contend with over the past 12 months or so when management's efforts should have been unhindered to organise production:- Gongs of haulage signal bells deliberately

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<sup>108</sup> C.G., 11.9.42.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 6.11.42.

wrenched off the castings. The complete castings of haulage signal bells deliberately smashed. Electric signal wires pulled out of every joint box in a circuit half-a-mile long. Bucket full of sand, kept for fire emergencies, emptied into the glass jars of liquid Leclanche signal batteries. Electric signal wires inconspicuously short-circuited. Underground telephone wires pulled out of the telephone, the ends short-circuited and pushed back into the telephone. Glass from broken bottles found thrown into the chaff for horses' food underground ... High quality cotton ropes ... used for driving 100 h.p. haulage, cut and removed ... Blocks of wood found deliberately wedged in the return end drum of belt conveyors underground. Rubber conveyor belts ... found to be unexpectedly cut lengthways down the middle. On investigation sharp pointed pieces of steel had been found wedged in the conveyor drive head so that they were cutting into the belts as they passed over the drive rollers ... Trams of stones sent in for packing the wastes frequently sent out again camouflaged by the colliers who put a covering of lumps of coal on top of the stones. The percentage of rubbish filled out by colliers with coal increased from 5 to 6% to the appalling figure of approximately 20% - in itself almost equal to absenteeism as a deterrent to production."<sup>110</sup>

Tallis went on to maintain that management "... should not be accused of bickering when they remonstrated with the workmen's representatives about such things." Though the workmen's representatives did not uphold these deliberate acts,

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<sup>110</sup> Western Mail, 17.11.42.

claimed Tallis, they nevertheless "did little except shield the culprits."<sup>111</sup> He appealed to all "the responsible and patriotic" workmen in the South Wales collieries to go out of their way to check the activities of the "irresponsible minority who, in all parts of the coalfield, committed acts similar to those enumerated above."

Speaking in reply on behalf of the SWMF Executive, Horner refuted Tallis's list and claimed that the matter of "sabotage" had never been raised in meetings between the representatives of the owners and those of the Federation ... "Nor had proofs been provided to establish the guilt of any particular person."<sup>112</sup> The Council were quite certain, said Horner, that the great majority of workmen had too great a responsibility, "especially in the situation today," to have even thought of perpetrating the kinds of actions to which Tallis had referred. He, Horner, "could not appreciate why", if Tallis had proof of his accusations, "he had refrained from proceedings" against the persons he alleged to be guilty. If he did not possess the requisite proof for proceedings he was not "entitled to make general accusations through the public Press."<sup>113</sup> The Federation council could not accept the guilt of their members, said Horner, but at the same time, they offered no support of any kind to any individual person, "now or in the future", found guilty of endangering the life of his comrades or of impeding the war effort by "misusing the instruments of production provided."<sup>114</sup>

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111 Ibid.

112 C.G., 20.11.42.

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid.

The numbers of individuals prosecuted for such acts had, indeed, been very small since the outbreak of war. Allegations such as Tallis's provided little more than a spice of variety to the endless accusations of absenteeism and ca'canny which were levelled at the miners by management, owners and Government alike. And it was these latter allegations which provoked the most sustained newspaper attacks upon the miners and which drew forth, by way of reply from the Federation leadership, the clearest indication of the latter's will to collaborate with the Government and the owners, not only for the sake of victory at war, but also in order that it might project a public image of itself as a responsible and patriotic organization which was seen to be actively promoting the Allied cause in the most difficult sectors of the Home Front and which would fulfil loyally and efficiently any future role as a partner in the post-war nationalised industry. Thus, in October 1942, we find the General Secretary of the SWMF, W.J. Saddler, emphasising the distinction between the great, and responsible, majority of workers in the industry and an irresponsible minority who also happened to be young: the Federation, he informed his audience, was "not asking the miner who was working six days a week to do any more." It was the man who failed to turn up on Saturday or Monday whom the Federation was appealing to. On Saturdays, he claimed, there was generally 18-20 per cent absenteeism - mainly the result of young miners staying away. Absenteeism, by his reckoning, was "negligible among men over 40," and he appealed for "greater vigilance" from the younger miners."<sup>115</sup>

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115 Ibid., 20.10.42.

It was only simple justice, and certainly no accident, that W.J. Saddler was, but a few years after making this speech, appointed Deputy Director of Labour on the South Western (i.e. South Wales) Divisional Coal Board.

The prominence given to these appeals by Saddler and his colleagues did little to counteract the suspicion which prevailed amongst the less "co-operative" of their union's members, that the Federation's elected leadership was becoming concerned more with ensuring the maintenance of smooth production on the coalfield than with the task of exploiting for gain their membership's new found advantage of labour scarcity and job-security. The question was asked: "Why else would the executive of the Federation single out absenteeists for abuse when ample proof existed that the industry for many years had lacked adequate investment in new plant and machinery and had remained profitable only through the wide-scale employment of cheap labour?" Those who asked such questions were extremely reticent to accept, as allies, the owners of companies whose main concern appeared to be to rake-in whatever profits were obtainable whilst war raged and the coal market remained strong.<sup>116</sup>

These suspicions were not wholly justified; Horner, for one, never publicly attacked absenteeists without at the same time, criticizing the mismanagement and lack of planning and mechanization which he believed to be the root of the problem of underproduction.

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116 See page 325.

Footnote 116

"... the vested interests in the (coal) industry are now (1943/44) enjoying ... a period of prosperity such as they have not known for many years. Direct comparison of profits with the pre-war period is difficult, because of the many ways in which profits are understated in published accounts, especially in over-provision for tax and the understated amounts retained by subsidiary companies. But the figures show an unmistakable upward trend, which is especially marked when the ordinary dividend figures of the war years are compared with the pre-war period, including the re-armament boom. In a random sample of thirty-two colliery companies it was found that only three paid lower average gross dividends in the five years 1939-43 than in the previous five 1933-38, and twenty-seven paid higher dividends. At the same time, there has been a considerable piling up of cash reserves for post-war development."

	Average Ordinary Dividend	
	1934-38	1939-43
Ocean Coal and Wilsons	2.1	4.1
Partridge Jones	3.7	4.25
Powell Duffryn	6.6	6.7
Tredegear Iron and Steel	3.3	4
Guest Keen	5.2	7.5

Margot Heinemann, op.cit., pp.124 and 125.

The owners laid great stress upon countering the charge that they were concerned only with reaping profits. The Chairman of Amalgamated Anthracite, F.A. Szarvasy, for example, defended the owners in 1943 by pointing out that, in the previous 15 years, the company had "distributed £41 million in wages, in National Insurance and Workmen's Compensation, whereas during that period only £700,000 had been paid to the benefit of the many millions of capital employed."

C.G., 2.7.43.

The Colliery Guardian reported wartime profits as follows in January 1941: "Because ... of rising production and regularity of work, the financial position was favourable ... the credit balance was estimated at well over £200,000 a month. Precise figures cannot be given, as the ascertainment are not now available for publication." 3.1.41.

In January 1943, it was reported that "markets were firm and active. All the bituminous collieries were heavily committed ... export trade was being carried on under extreme difficulty because of the prior needs of the home market ..." C.G., 1.1.43.

Nevertheless, the fact that such suspicions existed at all indicates that there was a sense of alienation from their elected leaders present in the minds of a considerable number of miners, and especially in the minds of younger miners. It was an alienation which found impatient expression in all manner of unofficial action - from the small-scale practice of ca'canny at innumerable workplaces to the dramatic and large-scale Boys' Strikes - and one which was undoubtedly heightened not only by the continued failure of the industry (and the Union) to provide its workforce with the financial and compensatory incentives which it so obviously required, but also by its failure to supply the "advanced" tools and machinery which its workers needed if they were to produce the extra tonnages so vocally demanded of them by Government, Owners, Union and Press.

In this latter respect, the sense of alienation was very widely shared amongst miners of all ages. They read, daily, articles such as that by the prominent mining engineer, John Kane, in the Western Mail bemoaning the decline in productivity at the pits: "... the tempo of production is definitely slower than it was a year ago," wrote Kane, "and ... there is not the slightest doubt that the cause is due to the effects of the Essential Work Order, and the high wages paid in the Royal Ordnance Factories ..."<sup>117</sup>

This kind of simplistic and politically biased assessment can have done little to restore the workforce's confidence in

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<sup>117</sup> C.G., 8.5.42.



those with whom their leaders were co-operating. Productivity, in terms of the production of saleable coal per manshift worked at the face, had, in fact, been declining steadily since 1937: Table 6, below, lists the output of saleable coal produced per manshift worked at the coal-face, all-underground, and all wage-earners employed, for the period 1930-1944. The manshifts worked at the coal-face expressed as a percentage of all shifts worked is also shown.

TABLE SIX

OUTPUT OF SALEABLE COAL PER MANSHIFT

Year	Output of Saleable Coal per Manshift Worked at the Coal Face cwts	Output of Saleable Coal per Manshift Worked Underground cwts	Output of Saleable Coal per Manshift Worked by all Wage-earners cwts	Manshifts Worked at the Coal Face as a percentage of Total Manshifts Worked
1930 ... ..	43.22	24.06	19.98	46.23
1931 ... ..	42.29	23.48	19.40	45.87
1932 ... ..	42.77	23.61	19.36	45.27
1933 ... ..	43.42	23.80	19.51	44.94
1934 ... ..	44.38	24.11	19.83	44.67
1935 ... ..	46.20	24.86	20.40	44.17
1936 ... ..	48.94	25.59	20.82	42.55
1937 ... ..	47.69	25.08	20.59	43.16
1938 ... ..	45.99	24.76	20.13	43.78
1939 ... ..	45.85	24.47	19.87	43.33
1940 ... ..	43.54	22.87	18.38	42.22
1941 ... ..	43.91	22.32	17.71	40.33
1942 ... ..	42.91	21.41	16.89	39.36
1943 ... ..	42.61	20.81	16.34	38.34
1944 ... ..	41.29	19.71	15.38	37.26

Source : South Wales Coalfield Regional Report, 1946.

The initial drop in output per manshift (from 1930 to 1932) was, perhaps, largely due to the unsettled state of the industry at the time. During this period of great trade depression, saleable output had fallen from 48 million tons in 1929 to 35 million tons in 1932,<sup>118</sup> and productivity seems to have been adversely affected while the industry endeavoured to adjust itself to the rapidly changing demand. There is some evidence for this in the figures themselves, for it will be seen that while the output per manshift worked at the face and "all-underground" began to improve in 1932, the figure for all employed continued to decline slightly. The inference is that the internal distribution of labour within the industry had not yet been adjusted to the changed conditions.

Apart from the initial falling-off, the figures for output per manshift exhibit two distinct trends, namely, a progressive improvement from 1933 to 1936 and a continuous deterioration from 1937 onwards. It will be convenient to consider the period in the two phases marked by these trends.

The improvement achieved over the years 1933-36 was largely due to three main factors. In the first place, as has already been stated, the period 1930-33 was one of great contraction in the scale of mining operations generally. Many mines were closed down and as these were, for the most part, the least productive ones, it follows that their closure tended to improve the productivity of the coalfield as a whole.<sup>119</sup>

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118 See, above, Table 2, page 286.

119 See, below, Table 7, page 336.

Secondly, not only were the least productive mines closed down but many of the mines remaining in production were re-organised to operate economically on much smaller outputs. This re-organisation generally took the form of concentration of output within the most productive seams or districts, while at the same time economic considerations tended to force collieries generally to concentrate upon their most productive seams.<sup>120</sup> The effect of this policy upon the standard of production was beneficial from the point of view of immediate production, but such a policy would tend to have adverse repercussions on the standard as and when those seams and districts became exhausted. Thirdly, there was a substantial increase in the degree of mechanisation, and it follows from what has been said above that many of the additional machines were applied in the most productive seams, and therefore in conditions likely to yield maximum results. In Figure 4 the output per manshift, per faceworker and all-employed has been plotted against the proportions of output cut by machines, got by pneumatic picks, and mechanically conveyed. The graphs appear to confirm the view that the increased scale of mechanisation was a vital factor in improving the standard of production up to 1936. (Figure 4, p.333.)

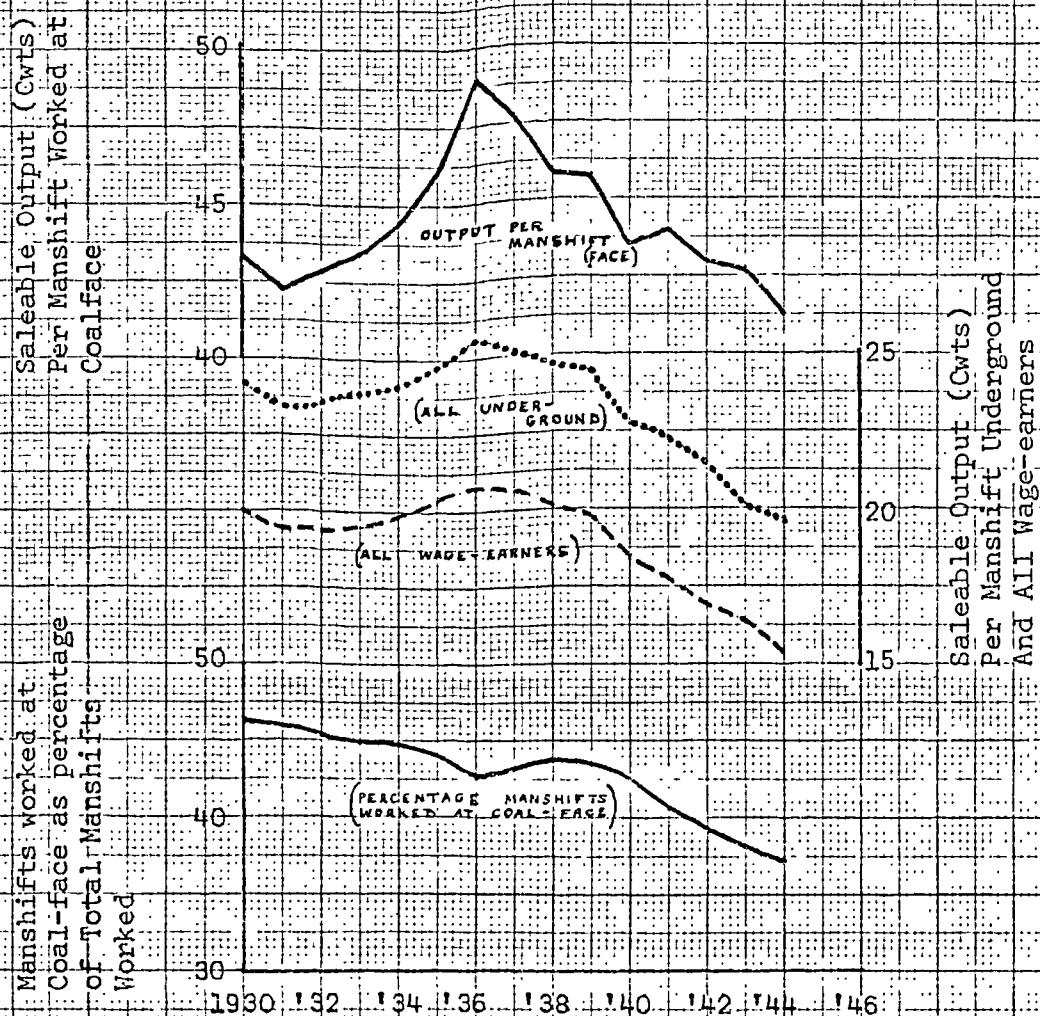
Figure 3 (page 331) graphs the Saleable output per manshift worked at the coal-face, underground and by all wage-earners, and manshifts worked at the coal-face as a percentage of all manshifts worked.

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120 Colliery Year Book and Coal Trades Review, vols. 1929-34, and Reports of H.M. Inspectors of Mines, Cardiff and Swansea Districts, 1929-34, "Introductions".

FIGURE 3

THE SALEABLE OUTPUT PER MANSHIFT WORKED AT THE COAL-FACE, ALL-UNDERGROUND AND BY ALL WAGE-EARNERS, AND MANSHIFTS WORKED AT THE COAL-FACE AS A PERCENTAGE OF ALL MANSHIFTS WORKED.



1930-1946

Source : Figures obtained from South Wales Coalfield Regional Report, 1946.

Taken together, the two graphs indicate that the increases in output per manshift worked at the face (from 42.49 cwts in 1931 to 48.94 cwts in 1936) and in output per manshift overall (from 19.36 cwts in 1932 to 20.82 cwts in 1936)<sup>121</sup> were achieved despite a steady decline in the proportion of manshifts worked at the coal-face which indicates that such a reduction is not necessarily associated with an automatic lowering of production efficiency.<sup>122</sup>

The sudden reversal of the productivity trend in 1937, and the further decline in 1938, is more difficult to explain. Possibly, the policy of concentration which was a feature of the preceeding years, as mentioned earlier, had reached its practical limit, and the maintenance of output, together with the increased demand for coal in 1937, necessitated the intensification of development work, and the working of a greater proportion of less productive seams. It is true that several mines which had closed down earlier came back into production about this time, but the available evidence suggests that the increased scale of development work only accounts for a small part of the decrease in productivity.<sup>123</sup> The increase in the proportion of manshifts worked at the face from 42.55% in 1936 to 43.78% in 1938<sup>124</sup> supports this view and suggests that the working of a higher proportion of less productive seams was possibly the major factor.

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121 Supplement to M.of F&P "Statistical Digest", 1947.

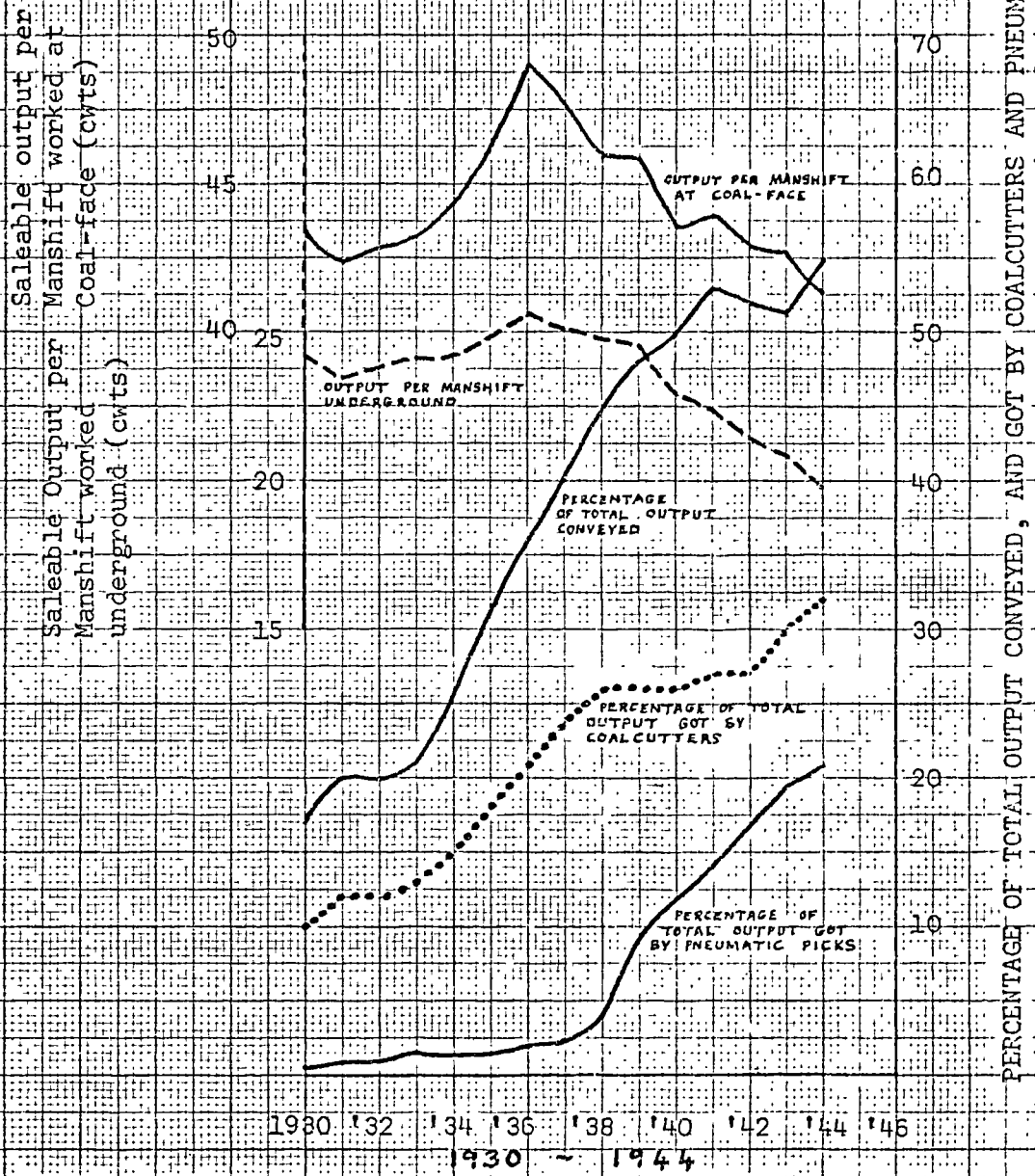
122 See Chapters 3 and 4 above, for an exploration of some of the "compensatory" methods of rationalisation undertaken by the combine companies.

123 See Appendices to H.M. Inspector of Mines Reports: Cardiff and Swansea Districts, for these years.

124 Supplement to M. of F&P Statistical Digest, 1947: Table VIII.

FIGURE 4

1930 - 1946



Source : Figures obtained from South Wales Coalfield Regional Report, 1946.

With regard to mechanisation, it will be seen that the proportions of output cut by machines, got by pneumatic picks and mechanically conveyed, continued to increase.

If mechanisation had contributed to the higher standard of production in the preceding years, there seems little doubt that the "failure" of the extension of this process to produce the anticipated results was primarily due to the fact that some machines were now being applied to thinner and otherwise less productive seams. But this cannot fully explain why the increased scale of mechanisation was unable even to maintain the standard of production reached in 1936.

Whatever the priority of reasons for the decline in the standard of production may have been, it is clear that by 1939, when the loss of manpower to the armament industries and the armed forces had become serious, the efficiency of the mining industry in South Wales had already fallen appreciably and was still deteriorating. With such a background, therefore, it is not surprising that the further loss of manpower during the war years combined with the disrupting influence of other war-time factors resulted in a further serious falling-off of the efficiency of production.

It is dangerous, however, to generalise about productivity without taking into account the fact that there were enormous differences in productivity rates between different collieries or groups of collieries. Factors determining productivity could range, as we have seen, from the difficulties presented



by geological conditions prevailing at any colliery, through the differences in size and organisation of production units, to the work-methods, work-traditions and pit-politics of collieries.

If, for instance, we look at the state of the coalfield in the week ending October 28th 1944, and examine the distribution of pits according to the standard of production and the size, we can observe considerable variation in productivity rates at different pits.

Separate data is given in Table 7 for anthracite and for steam and bituminous areas, as well as the combined figures for the coalfield.

The week ending 28th October was an average week for production in 1944<sup>125</sup> and the figures are based upon the output raised and weighed. The proportion of saleable output obtained from that raised and weighed was roughly 90% for the coalfield in 1944, but it varies greatly from pit to pit and this fact should be borne in mind when examining Table 7. At some pits it was as low as 75% and therefore a satisfactory standard of production on the raised and weighed basis did not necessarily connote a satisfactory standard of saleable coal produced. It should also be noticed that Table 7 shows the number of pits as distinct from the number of mines shown in Table 9. Two pits are sometimes treated as one mine for the purpose of the annual returns on which Table 9 is based, whereas Table 7 is compiled from weekly returns for individual pits.

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125 M of F&P Statistical Digest, 1945.

DISTRIBUTION OF PITS ACCORDING TO PRODUCTION AND SIZE FOR WEEK ENDED 28TH OCTOBER 1944

TABLE 7

(a) Anthracite Area - Output for Week - 67,683 tons

Output of Coal (Balised and Weighed) per Man-shift Worked - Week ended 28th October 1944																				
Pits Employing Wage earners	Over 70 cwt.			25 to 30 cwt.			20 to 25 cwt.			17.5 to 20 cwt.			15 to 17.5 cwt.			Less than 15 cwt.				
	No. of Pits	Wage Earners Employed	Output of Coal Tons	% of Anthr. Output	No. of Pits	Wage Earners Employed	Output of Coal Tons	% of Anthr. Output	No. of Pits	Wage Earners Employed	Output of Coal Tons	% of Anthr. Output	No. of Pits	Wage Earners Employed	Output of Coal Tons	% of Anthr. Output	No. of Pits	Wage Earners Employed	Output of Coal Tons	% of Anthr. Output
Under 100																				
100-249	1	49	343	0.51	3	129	730	1.08	2	116	576	0.85	3	105	457	0.68	16	446	857	1.29
250-499					1	214	1,244	1.84	1	102	504	0.74	1	239	1,041	1.54	5	787	1,028	2.86
500-749					1	344	1,851	2.73					3	1,123	4,483	6.62	13	5,381	14,573	22.12
750-999									1	604	2,908	4.30	2	1,256	4,919	7.27	7	3,787	12,017	17.75
1,000 and over													1	961	3,916	5.79	4	3,370	11,794	17.41
TOTAL	1	49	343	0.51	5	687	3,825	5.65	4	822	3,988	5.89	10	3,684	14,816	21.90	46	14,815	44,711	66.05

TABLE 7

## DISTRIBUTION OF PITS ACCORDING TO PRODUCTION AND SIZE FOR WEEK ENDING 28TH OCTOBER 1944

(b) Steam and Bituminous Area - Output for Week - 442,726 tons

Output of Coal (Mined and Weighed) per Man-shift Worked - Week ended 28th October 1944																												
Pits employing Wage earners	Over 30 cwt					25 to 30 cwt					20 to 25 cwt					17.5 to 20 cwt					15 to 17.5 cwt					Less than 15 cwt		
	No of Pits	Wage Em- ployed	Output of Coal Tons	% of Bitum Out- put	No of Pits	Wage Em- ployed	Output of Coal Tons	% of Bitum Out- put	No of Pits	Wage Em- ployed	Output of Coal Tons	% of Bitum Out- put	No of Pits	Wage Em- ployed	Output of Coal Tons	% of Bitum Out- put	No of Pits	Wage Em- ployed	Output of Coal Tons	% of Bitum Out- put	No of Pits	Wage Em- ployed	Output of Coal Tons	% of Bitum Out- put				
Under 100	3	26	239	0.05	11	166	1,282	0.29	19	288	2,247	0.51	5	140	730	0.16	11	264	1,210	0.27	55	913	3,830	0.97				
100-249	3	502	4,537	1.02	3	470	3,171	0.72	7	999	7,075	1.60	4	556	2,750	0.62	7	980	5,521	1.25	7	1,256	3,960	0.89				
250-499					4	1,375	8,233	1.86	4	1,368	8,205	1.85	8	3,144	14,160	3.20	9	2,692	17,001	3.84	12	3,225	12,458	2.81				
500-749					1	577	4,246	0.96	8	4,580	25,751	5.82	14	8,267	41,375	9.35	14	8,447	35,170	7.94	7	3,666	10,635	2.40				
750-999																												
1,000 and over					4	4,529	28,305	6.39	4	5,372	28,020	6.33	10	11,471	51,963	11.74	4	6,258	28,475	6.43								
TOTAL	6	528	4,776	1.07	23	7,117	45,237	10.22	50	19,358	107,138	24.21	49	30,178	142,838	32.27	50	22,563	102,146	23.07	85	12,340	40,591	9.16				

TABLE 7

DISTRIBUTION OF PITS ACCORDING TO PRODUCTION AND SIZE FOR WEEK ENDING 28TH OCTOBER 1944

(c) South Wales Coalfield (Anthracite, Steam and Bituminous Areas) - Total Output for Week - 510,409 tons

Output of Coal (Priced and Weighed) per Man-shift Worked - Week ended 28th October 1944																							
Pits Employing Wage earners	Over 30 cwt				25 to 30 cwt				20 to 25 cwt				17.5 to 20 cwt				15 to 17.5 cwt				Less than 15 cwt		
	No of Pits	Wage Earners Em- ployed	Output of Coal Tons	% of Total Out- put	No of Pits	Wage Earners Em- ployed	Output of Coal Tons	% of Total Out- put	No of Pits	Wage Earners Em- ployed	Output of Coal Tons	% of Total Out- put	No of Pits	Wage Earners Em- ployed	Output of Coal Tons	% of Total Out- put	No of Pits	Wage Earners Em- ployed	Output of Coal Tons	% of Total Out- put			
Under 100	3	26	239	0.05	12	215	1,625	0.32	22	417	2,977	0.58	7	256	1,306	0.26	14	369	1,567	0.33			
100-249	3	502	4,537	0.89	3	470	3,171	0.62	8	1,213	8,319	1.63	5	658	3,254	0.64	8	1,219	6,562	1.29			
250-499					4	1,375	8,233	1.61	5	1,712	10,056	1.97	8	3,144	14,160	2.77	12	3,815	21,484	4.21			
500-749					1	577	4,246	0.83	8	4,580	25,751	5.05	15	8,871	44,283	8.68	16	9,703	40,089	7.85			
750-999									8	6,811	35,840	7.02	8	6,600	31,860	6.24	6	4,883	18,685	3.66			
1,000 and over					4	4,529	28,305	5.55	4	5,312	28,020	5.49	10	11,471	51,963	10.18	4	6,258	28,475	5.58			
TOTAL	6	528	4,975	0.94	24	7,166	45,580	8.93	55	20,045	110,563	21.74	53	31,000	116,826	28.77	60	26,247	116,962	22.92			
																	131	27,156	85,302	16.71			

It can clearly be seen that in the anthracite area 87.95% of output was obtained from pits with a production standard of less than 17.5 cwts per manshift whereas the comparative figures for the steam and bituminous areas and for the coalfield as a whole were 32.23% and 39.63% respectively. The Table also reveals that 66.05% of the anthracite output was drawn from pits producing less than 15 cwts per manshift compared with 9.16% in the steam and bituminous area. This feature calls for closer examination, and in Table 8 there is a further analysis of those anthracite pits with an output of less than 15cwts per manshift as shown in Table 7.

TABLE 8

ANTHRACITE AREA : DISTRIBUTION OF PITS WITH AN OUTPUT OF LESS THAN 15 CWTs PER MANSHIFT  
WORKED ACCORDING TO SIZE AND PRODUCTION STANDARD

Output of Coal (Raised and Weighed) Per Manshift Worked - Week Ended 28th October 1944												
Pits Employing Wage-Earners	12.5 to 15 cwts				10.0 to 12.5 cwts				Less than 10 cwts			
	No of Pits	Wage-Earners Employed	Output of Coal Tons	Percentage of Anthracite Output	No of Pits	Wage-Earners Employed	Output of Coal Tons	Percentage of Anthracite Output	No of Pits	Wage-Earners Employed	Output of Coal Tons	Percentage of Anthracite Output
Under 100 ...	5	252	751	1.11	1	5	14	0.02	10	189	92	0.14
100-249 ...	-	-	-	-	1	156	525	0.78	4	631	1,413	2.09
250-499 ...	5	2,096	6,329	9.35	4	1,697	4,983	7.36	4	1,588	3,661	5.41
500-749 ...	3	1,601	5,587	8.25	3	1,568	4,810	7.11	1	618	1,620	2.39
750-999 ...	4	3,330	11,784	17.41	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1,000 & over	-	-	-	-	1	1,085	3,142	4.64	-	-	-	-
TOTAL	17	7,279	24,451	36.12	10	4,511	13,474	19.91	19	3,026	6,786	10.03

Source: South Wales Coalfield Regional Report, 1946.

The information given in Table 9 shows the size distribution of pits according to employment and the output raised and weighed per manshift worked for each size-group of pits. Separate figures are given for the anthracite and the steam and bituminous areas and for the coalfield as a whole. The Table shows the relatively low average standard of 13.34 cwts per manshift in the anthracite area compared with the average of 18.60 cwts per manshift in the remainder of the coalfield. The Table also shows that, in 1944 at least, there was no optimum size of pit from the point of view of productivity except that those pits employing less than 250 wage-earners were less productive than pits employing greater numbers.

TABLE 9

Size Distribution of Pits according to Employment and Output per Manshift  
(Raised and Weighed) for each Size Group: Week Ending 28th October 1944

(a) <u>Anthracite Area</u>						
Pits Employing Wage- Earners	Number of Pits	Wage-Earners		Output		Output per Manshift  cwts
		No Employed	Percentage of Total	Tons	Percentage of Anthracite Output	
under 100	25	845	4.21	2,963	4.38	13.58
100-249	8	1,342	6.69	4,727	6.98	11.58
250-499	17	6,848	34.14	21,307	31.48	13.14
500-749	10	5,647	28.15	19,844	29.32	13.69
750-999	5	4,291	21.39	15,700	23.20	14.26
1,000 +	1	1,085	5.41	3,142	4.64	11.47
TOTAL	66	20,058	100.00	67,683	100.00	13.34
(b) <u>Bituminous Areas</u>						
					Percentage of Bituminous Output	
Under 100	104	1,706	1.85	9,558	2.16	15.29
100-249	31	4,963	5.39	27,014	6.10	14.60
250-499	37	11,695	12.81	60,057	13.57	22.22
500-749	44	25,537	27.73	117,177	26.47	17.61
750-999	25	20,613	22.38	92,157	20.82	20.00
1,000 +	22	27,570	29.94	136,763	30.89	18.59
TOTAL	263	92,084	100.00	442,726	100.00	18.60
(c) <u>Combined Field</u>						
Under 100	129	2,551	2.27	12,521	2.45	14.85
100-249	39	6,305	5.62	31,741	6.22	13.75
250-499	54	18,543	16.54	81,364	15.94	18.81
500-749	54	31,184	27.81	137,021	26.85	16.91
750-999	30	24,904	22.21	107,857	21.13	18.90
1,000 +	23	28,655	25.55	139,905	27.41	18.33
TOTAL	329	112,142	100.00	510,409	100.00	17.68

Source : South Wales, Regional Survey Report, HMSO 1946.



The prime cause of the decline in output per manshift after 1941 was undoubtedly the loss of skilled and experienced manpower. As we have seen, the average number of persons employed in the industry in South Wales fell from 136,116 in 1938 to 130,954 in 1939. Between May 1940 and May 1941, there was a decrease of some 24,000 in the average number of persons employed on the coalfield.<sup>126</sup> 3,408 underground workers, including 1,754 coal-face workers, left the industry to join the Services in the year 1940 alone, and this loss of manpower continued, although on a diminishing scale until the first Essential Work Order came into operation in May 1941.

One effect of the Order was to restrict the migration of labour from coalmining, and this, together with the measures subsequently enforced for the abnormal recruitment of ex-miners from other industries and H.M. Forces, and later for the recruitment of optants and ballotees, succeeded in checking the loss of manpower, and, indeed, resulted in a small but steady increase in the number of persons employed from the middle of 1941 up to the early part of 1943, when the figure stood at 116,167.<sup>127</sup> The total number employed then fluctuated until Vesting Day, January 1947, when it stood at just over 115,000.

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126 The South Wales Coalfield Regional Survey Report, HMSO, 1946, p. 78, para. 203.

127 Ibid., p. 79, paragraph 206. It must be noted that, despite the operation of restrictive legislation, an appreciable turn-over of labour took place, and, although over the period 1941-44 emigration was almost balanced by recruitment, the industry in the meantime suffered a net loss of some 5,400 experienced workmen, including 2,300 colliers.

The Committee responsible for the 1945/6 Survey of the South Wales field were adamant in blaming the loss of skilled manpower to the armaments industry and to the Forces during the period 1939 to the middle of 1941 *for the decline in efficiency and productivity during the course of the War.* "The adverse effect upon the organisation of the industry was so great that the subsequent operation of the Essential Work Orders and the measures adopted for abnormal recruitment were inadequate to remedy the position."<sup>128</sup>

One of the effects of manpower movements during the War was an increase in the proportion of surface workers employed from 15.70% in 1938, to 18.56% in 1944 (20.57% on the anthracite field).<sup>129</sup> The percentage of surface workers employed had been increasing right through the Thirties: in 1932 it stood at 15.06 per cent, 1935 15.42 per cent, but whilst, during the pre-War Thirties the average annual output raised and weighed per surface worker had increased, (from 1,710 tons in 1932 to 1,860 tons in 1939) after 1939 it decreased at a remarkable rate - to 1,200 tons in 1944.<sup>130</sup>

Productivity was not helped, either, by the fact that easily the largest proportion of those wage-earners who left the industry during 1943 and 1944 were face workers.<sup>131</sup> It was

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128 Ibid., p.82, paragraph 210.

129 Ibid., p.83, Table XLV.

130 Ibid., para 213. It should also be pointed out, however, that some of the increase in the proportion of surface workers was probably due to the greater proportion of dirt filled out with the coal and the additional numbers of fitters and maintenance men, etc. required in connection with the expansion of coalface mechanisation.

131 Mining Association of Great Britain, "Statistical Review of the Coal Industry", 1945.

more difficult to train the optants and Bevin boys and ballotees in this sector of production, possibly, than any other in the pit. Allied to this, the proportion of workers "elsewhere below ground" (i.e. not at the coal face) increased from 1930 to 1944, at the same time as the industry witnessed a decline in the proportion of manshifts worked at the face. (Due largely to the aforementioned loss of faceworkers).

The accumulation of these factors point to there having taken place important changes in the organisation of the industry on its labour side. These changes tended, in general, to decrease the standards of productivity. Up to 1936 the effect of these changes was more than offset by an increase in the output per manshift worked at the coalface, but after 1936 their effect was to accentuate the decline in productivity at the coalface. The 1945/6 Survey illustrated the effect of these changes by calculating that "even with the reduced manpower available and the relatively low output of 41.29 cwts per manshift worked at the face obtained in 1944, if the proportion of manshifts worked at the coal face had remained the same as in 1939, namely, 43.33 per cent of all manshifts worked, the output of saleable coal in 1944 would have been 16.3 per cent, or 3,680,000 tons greater than that actually obtained in the coalfield.<sup>132</sup> "

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132 Regional Survey Report, 1946, p.85, para. 220.

The position on the anthracite field was even less conducive to increased productivity. Table 10 illustrates the relationship of this sector of the coalfield to the Steam and Bituminous sector:

TABLE 10

Estimated Average Number of Wage-Earners on Colliery Books during the Year 1944

	At the Coal Face		Elsewhere below Ground		Surface		Total
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent	No.
Anthracite	7,673	38.16	8,297	41.27	4,136	20.57	20,106
Steam and Bituminous	40,198	43.58	35,320	38.29	16,719	18.13	92,237

Source : The South Wales Coalfield Regional Survey, 1946.

Another effect of the loss of manpower to the Forces and to other industries in the period after 1938 was the increase in the average age of persons employed in coal mining. The two investigations carried out by the Monmouthshire and South Wales Coalowners Association in 1935 and December 1944 showed an appreciable increase in the proportion of persons employed in the higher age groups and a corresponding decrease in the proportions employed in the lower age groups between 1935 and 1944. South Wales also employed a higher proportion of wage earners in the higher age-groups (55 and over) than the industry in Britain as a whole.<sup>133</sup> There are certain obvious links

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., Table LI, p.89.

to be made between this rising average age and the decrease in productivity experienced on the coalfield after 1936, but the correlation of age and productivity is a complex one, and the question will be discussed in the light of the more comprehensive statistics supplied by the NCB.

These were some of the more important and immediate obstacles to increased production. As often as not, they received little mention in the speeches and editorials which exhorted the miners to attain higher levels of production. This absence bred amongst the workforce a sense of frustration and, in some places, a sense of anger - not merely because miners felt themselves to be the butt of unfair and unwarranted public criticism - criticism which, they argued, could better have been directed at the shambles of mismanagement and technical backwardness all around them - but also because there existed a feeling that the much-publicised gestures of self-criticism by the Federation (regarding the problems of absenteeism and ca'canny) constituted an unnecessary retreat from what could well have amounted to an unassailable industrial bargaining position. For the leadership, with the rank-and-file's blessing, to postpone until the "post-war Elysium" the most forthright of their demands for complete nationalisation was one thing - there was, after all, a dire threat (in the shape of the Nazi armies) to the very existence of free trade unions - but it was quite another thing for the leadership to take upon its shoulders a share of the employer's burden of <sup>en</sup> assuring that employees expended maximum effort, week in and week out, at their place of work.

It was no mere coincidence that this apparent change of vision amongst Federation leaders - as to what properly constituted the role of a trade-union executive - occurred at just the time when it became transparently clear that state "interference" in the management of the mining industry would have to increase dramatically if sufficient coal was to be produced to ensure an Allied victory and a speedy post-war industrial recovery. The prospect of achieving nationalisation was now more real than at any time since the First World War and men like Lawther and Horner were determined that it should not evaporate into thin air as it had once done under the wand of Lloyd George. They set out, quite consciously, to prove to the public that the British miner, through his elected leaders, could halt the industry's seemingly inevitable slide into decline. In order to convince that public, they first deemed it necessary to get their own house into order. Absenteeists, restrictive practices and unofficial action must cease and the union's Executive must be seen to be capable of strong, dynamic and enlightened leadership. Only when this stage had been achieved would the union's criticisms of existing managerial techniques carry their full weight and only then would it prove possible for the miners to contribute seriously to the industry's renaissance through massive involvement in the work of pit production committees, joint productivity drives and innumerable other schemes for increasing overall production. Success here would, or so it was believed, mean public recognition of the inestimable value to society at large of a responsible trade-union executive.

It comprised a vision which influenced the actions of men most potently in the mines of the Rhondda Valleys and in those of the central steam-coal area in general. In these pits it was transmuted by influential Communists and Labourites, alike, into resolute trade union discipline. Its influence was weakest amongst the pit boys and young miners of the anthracite field and the eastern area where continuous strikes and go-slows did not bode well for a future in which the Federation's executive seemed intent upon continuing to fulfil its newly self-imposed burden of helping to stamp out "irregular" practices amongst the workforce at the same time as ensuring that proper work discipline prevailed in the pits.

The dissatisfaction of the boys and younger miners surfaced increasingly as the tide of war turned and an Allied victory began to look inevitable. It manifested itself even in the midst of Powell Duffryn country - in the Penrhiwcheiber Strike of August 1943 - and across the coalfield as a whole during the general stoppage which followed the announcement of the Porter Award in March 1944. Both events provided ample evidence of the existence of widespread unrest - a good deal of which had been at least partly provoked by the way in which the SWMF Executive had appeared to many of its members to have moved too far too quickly in its efforts to co-operate with the Government and management.

As if by way of compensation for this "sacrifice", there seems to have taken place amongst numbers of important colliery lodges a shift back to more defensive realignments based upon the structures of the pre-war combine committees, many of which had

moderated or even ceased their agitational activities during wartime in order that their members might comply with the efforts of the SWMF Executive to fulfil its new responsibilities.

### 3. Expressions of Frustration

The Soviet defence of Stalingrad served to provide for the Allied countries not only an unparalleled source of wartime inspiration but also ~~served~~ to equip Left-wing trade union leaders with a whole string of fresh superlatives. Arthur Horner succeeded in subduing restless miners by conjuring up before them an image of a proletarian Red Army rolling back those same Fascist hordes which previously had scattered like confetti the armies of the bourgeois states. Whiners amongst the membership of the SWMF watched their grievances kicked out of wartime conference halls whenever Horner chose to contrast their comparatively petty nature with the enormity of the Soviet sacrifices. Time and again, he advocated the casting aside of troublesome restrictions in order that the workforce might thereby galvanise itself into a state of unparalleled productiveness. In April 1943, for example, he warned delegates at the SWMF Annual Conference that it was "More necessary than ever to strengthen our war effort to speed up victory, and then to work together for the fulfilment of the tasks which will confront us following victory. "Personal or petty inner squabbles must be left behind in



the common determination to work out our policy in relation to the vital questions which affect our people...

"The coming months may force all of us to a new understanding of the significance of the word "sacrifice".

"Mineworkers everywhere know too well what sacrifice means, and we are ready. Our readiness will be effective to the extent we are united. Let us close our ranks; let us set an example by what we are prepared to do in the struggle for victory; let us remove every factor which prevents the realization of the task we are called upon to perform.

"We must never forget what our comrades in the Armed Forces and the Merchant Service are expected to face and suffer; what the comrades in occupied Europe are doing, and, above all, the unprecedented sacrifices of the people of the Soviet Union in these recent months. Let us steel ourselves to intensify our work so as to justify our demand upon the Government to open a Second Front in Europe."<sup>134</sup>

His eloquent appeal was interwoven with renewed expressions of enthusiasm for the possibility, floated once again in certain quarters in the Spring of 1943, of affiliation by the Communist Party to the Labour Party. Indeed, his whole Presidential Address of April 1943, owed a great deal to contemporary C.P. rhetoric. It was a debt which he showed no reluctance to acknowledge:

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<sup>134</sup> SWMF Annual Conference Report, 1943, "Presidential Address", pp 12-13.

"I believe in the Declaration of the Communist Party", he informed the Annual Conference, "which is to the effect that (in the event of affiliation becoming a fact) it will loyally observe the constitution of the Labour Party, because I know that it is the intention and determination of the Communist Party to do so. This is not a formal matter; it is one which in my view is essential to the winning of the war, to winning the peace, and to going forward towards the achievement of our common Socialist aims."<sup>135</sup>

There were others on the coalfield, however, some of them long-time members of the Communist Party, who felt less inclined to echo King Street's apparently selfless and patriotic appeals.

Unofficial strikes, as we have seen, had done a great deal to besmirch the manufactured image of a mining workforce solidly united in its determination to aid the defeat of fascism, and they posed a large number of unresolved contradictions and problems which demanded immediate attention. The Agenda for the April 1943 SWMF Conference reflected the disquiet which resulted from this state of affairs. The listed Resolutions articulated the general concern of the Lodge Committees that their grievances, half-ignored by the Government and Owners alike, were multiplying at an alarming rate in the shadows cast by so many patriotic and pro-Soviet, production-boosting speeches.

The Lodges of the Rhondda, which had controlled and disciplined their younger members during the Boys' Strikes some 10 months earlier,

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p.12.

made no attempt to hide their impatience with the funereal pace at which the problems highlighted by the Strikes were being investigated by the Coal Controllers. Their resolutions served to indicate the strain to which Lodge discipline was being subjected and, at the same time, tended to call into question the value of the Government-MFGB-C.P. "truce".

At the militant Fernhill Lodge, for example, (where the Lodge committee had persuaded its boys to refrain from striking) the men voted to add some additional bite and urgency to a resolution submitted by the Caerau Lodge (whose boys had participated in the strike) which demanded an immediate improvement in the working conditions of young miners. The Fernhill amendment stressed the need, as the Lodge Committee saw it, for solemn Government assurances that the youth of the industry would not be forced to continue to accept the prospect of another decade of neglect, insecurity and poor wages such as they had been forced to accept and experience prior to 1942/43. It read, "...realising the importance of the youth in service in the war effort and the peace to follow, we urge the MFGB and the TUC to prepare a youth policy - education, place in industry, vocational training, health fitness, recreation, and call upon the Board of Education to so re-organize the service of youth scheme to include all youth organizations irrespective of their religious or political beliefs, in order that they are trained for their rightful place in future society."<sup>136</sup>

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136 SWMF Annual Conference Agenda and Executive Committee Report, 1943, pp. 24 and 28.

The Fernhill Lodge was joined by seven others in forwarding resolutions and/or amendments aimed at improving the conditions and wages of pit boys.<sup>137</sup> This was hardly surprising, considering that this Conference was the first to be held since the Boys' Strikes had taken place the previous June.

Horner, a Rhondda man himself, was undoubtedly aware of the restive mood of this section of his membership, but he chose, nevertheless, to mince no words in laying down the law as far as the question of sympathetic action by the older miners for their younger comrades was concerned. He first congratulated the "vast majority" of SWMF members for the way in which they stuck at their work during the "monotonous and difficult war days", but immediately launched into an attack upon what he termed "a small minority who are acting in a fashion which cannot be justified by this or any other organisation..." The "irresponsibility" of this minority, he explained to the assembled delegates, arose often from a "deep sense of class loyalty..." in which "An injury to one, is an injury to all." This "excellent sentiment", he argued, had "sometimes been exploited, with the result that the majority have been placed in the invidious position of having to choose between support for the recalcitrant minority and the policy of this Federation."<sup>138</sup> Those who failed to carry out the will of the majority "... even though they strike or hold up work in violation of the policy of this Organisation

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137 The lodges were Upper Gilfach, Rose Heyworth, Cwmtillery, Pidwell and Coegnant in the Steam and Bituminous fields, and Dillwyn in the Anthracite. Boys' strikes had occurred ten months earlier at Rose Heyworth, Coegnant and Dillwyn.

138 SWMF Annual Conference Report, 1943, "Presidential Address", p.7.

to which we all belong...", were guilty, he argued, of bringing about the "early disintegration" of the Federation.<sup>139</sup>

He described the "recalcitrant minority" as "blacklegs" - the most emotive term available to him at that point in time, for had not the Federation only just succeeded in eradicating the "blacklegs" union from the coalfield after the most bitter and prolonged struggle since that of 1926? And was it not common knowledge that the blackleg was anathema to effective trade unionism? Even the youngest SWMF member knew these to be truths. And if this was so, then why, asked Horner, could they not apply such knowledge to their own actions?

He took the language of the coalfield's militants and threw it back, mangled, into their faces. The most intransigent of them became, in his new wartime mythology of industrial conflict, metamorphosed from heroes into traitors.

The influence of such rhetoric proved, however, to be little more than fleeting - especially when, like Horner's in 1943, it contradicted its recipient's everyday experience. Strikes continued to disrupt production with familiar regularity as the strains imposed by the demands of the war economy exacerbated the already tense relationship existing between management, union leadership and the rank-and-file. Two strikes, in particular, caused an inordinate amount of public criticism and controversy, and, at the same time, served to underline the fact that there was developing amongst large sections of the workforce a sense that events were alienating them from certain of the most prominent of their elected leaders.

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139 Ibid.

The locations of the strikes were, in themselves, significant. The first occurred in the most predictable of locations: at Tareni in the Swansea Valley; but the second occurred at Penrhiwceiber, a large steam-coal colliery in the lower reaches of the Aberdare Valley - an area which had begun, only during the war years, to show the first signs since 1926 that its workforce was prepared to exert any real trade union muscle. The locations are significant because they illustrate how both the grievances and the sense of "alienation" were transcending the old geological barriers which, in the pre-war years, had served to colour the character of protest at anthracite and steam coal mines.

## PART TWO

### THE WAR YEARS

Chapter 6 : 1939-1942.

Chapter 7 : 1942-1947.

Chapter 8 : Tareni and Penrhiwceiber.

Chapter 9 : Normality Almost Returned,  
1944-1947.

## Chapter Eight

### Tareni and Penrhiwceiber

The Tareni strike took place in June 1943 in protest against the jailing of 24 hauliers on charges of impeding war production. The men were alleged to have pursued a policy of ca'canny and were each fined £5, with the alternative of one month's imprisonment. As a protest against the proceedings, they chose to go to prison and by June 17th over 4,200 miners employed at 11 pits had ceased work in sympathy with their action.<sup>1</sup>

The strikes lasted for between five and twelve days. Work was resumed only after a recommendation to do so was issued from a meeting of the lodges of the anthracite area. Acting as a conciliator during the dispute, Horner had found his task complicated by the hard-line taken on the matter by the Government's Coal Controller in South Wales. Between April and July, the Controller obtained 17 convictions of absenteeists. 16 men were fined and one imprisoned.<sup>2</sup> More than 1,000 workmen were reported for offences under the Essential Work Order (EWO) during the month; more than 800 of the cases being connected with absenteeism and lateness. Half the number reported were men under 30 years of age. .

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1 PRO, Lab 10/369, RWE 22.6.43. (There were, in fact, 12 pits involved if 40 boys striking in sympathy at Brynhenllys are included).

2 C.G., 2.7.43.



One thousand warning letters were issued and follow-up action showed that a high percentage of recipients showed an improvement in their timekeeping. The Coal Controller announced further and more ominous measures. He warned that unless productivity improved in 17 selected collieries they would close and their workforces <sup>be</sup> redeployed at more productive undertakings.<sup>3</sup>

The announcement was of particular concern to the anthracite pits involved in the Tareni dispute. With the exception of Varteg colliery, all of the pits which took sympathetic action were characterised by poor productivity records<sup>4</sup> and backward production techniques.

The strikers interpreted the Coal Controller's attacks upon their alleged practices of ca'canny as constituting yet another managerial assault upon "custom and practice" in the anthracite pits. What complicated matters for them was ~~they~~<sup>at</sup> they now perceived this assault as coming from two directions at once. They saw management's efforts being aided by a Fifth column - namely, their own elected leaders - and they acted accordingly, often rejecting the advice even of trusted union officials.

Evan John's is a case in point. John, throughout his working life, was an inveterate "rank-and-filer". That is, he rarely held an official post above Lodge level and frequently was in the midst of leading and planning unofficial movements and

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> See below, Chapter 12, Table 2.

actions. He was, however, a member of the Communist Party and, as such, he was concerned in 1943 to ensure that the Party's line of offering maximum support for the war effort was being implemented. It fell upon him, as a popular and hard-working militant, to make the initial overtures to the Tareni strikers and to attempt, on behalf of the South Wales miners' executive, to reimpose discipline at the pit. (He was Chairman of the Clydach Merthyr Lodge in 1943).

He recalls that he travelled up the Swansea Valley and appealed to the strikers to return to work:

"... of course, they didn't take any notice, though Horner was there and Alf Davies - I remember us all down there - but they said 'Ahh, it was his (Evan John's) bloody fault that they were sent to jail'." <sup>5</sup>

Evan John also recalled that much of the hostility expressed towards him was being generated by Labour Party activists during what he termed a "very dirty campaign" waged against him and other Communist officials of the miners' union. This is an extremely significant allegation in as much as it provides a clue as to why it was that so many young mining militants in the Valleys continued to support the Labour Party despite the attitudes of prevarication and equivocation adopted by Labour's parliamentary leadership towards matters of social and economic reform during the war years.

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5 Recording of Evan John, Glais, June 1976.

The "campaign" referred to was one waged by D.J. Williams (later Labour MP for the Neath Division), Dai Rolf Llewellyn and others to keep Communists from being elected to the Executive Council of the SWMF. Llewellyn, who, as we have already seen, was himself an ex-C.P. member until his bitter disagreement with Alf Davies over the nature and meaning of the Boys' Strikes of 1942, commanded something of a reputation of being a man who, having supported and led the protesting Boys, was unfettered by Party loyalties and ever-ready to shout the case of the underdog - a task which previously the Communists had performed with alacrity but which lately they had performed in a more subdued fashion. As an ex-Communist and a member of the SWMF executive, he had all the influential contacts he needed to disrupt the political progress of his former allies. He portrayed them as a breed of opportunistic class traitors who, at one moment, were prepared to encourage rank-and-file militancy and, at the next, to act the part of the executive's hatchet men. The Tareni affair provided a perfect vehicle for the dissemination of such propaganda and Llewellyn lost no time in exploiting it.

There was little semblance of a wartime "truce" between local Labour and Communist officials as far as electioneering within the union was concerned. Evan John recalls his reasons for declining to stand as an executive candidate in the 1943 elections: (He stood twice; successful on his first attempt and defeated by D.J. Williams on his second).

Questioner: "You didn't try again?"

Evan John: "No, I didn't bother now, because I saw the dirty tactics that had been used and all that, I said it wasn't worth bothering; as I said, "they're trying to break my home up" I said. So they'd been putting the rumours out to my wife, but she knew different see, but as far as they were concerned, it could have been, gone that way."

Questioner: "They were pretty nasty elections at this time?"

Evan John: "Oh, terrific see."<sup>6</sup>

The Communist Party, likewise, indulged in "dirty tricks" - such as their frequent attempts to isolate and blacken the names of ex-Communists who opposed them. This treatment was meted out to Trevor James, an ex-Communist who stood as candidate for the post of Miners' Agent in the Swansea Area against the C.P.'s candidate, Ianto Evans. James won, largely, it appears, because of the publication by the C.P. of an injudicious personal attack upon him in the form of a leaflet which, far from serving to blacken his name, backfired upon the Communists by rallying Labour sympathizers to his defence.<sup>7</sup>

The Tareni strike served, most importantly, to emphasise the kinds of divisions which were likely to open if the union's executive continued to act as a production-promoter and surrogate

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6 Ibid. Also Swansea Miners' Library, Tape Nos 199 and 200: Sides 1 and 2, transcript p.32.

7 Ibid. The pamphlet was drawn up by the C.P.'s Regional Organizer for Wales, Idris Cox; a copy has not yet turned up.

disciplinarian. Mavericks like Dai Rolf Llewellyn aside, the executive was still a centre-of-the-road Labour Party dominated body in 1943.<sup>8</sup> The Communists, though powerful, were in a minority and committed to their party's line of support for the war effort. All factions within the executive were united in a long-term desire to see the coal industry nationalised and events were moving apace in that direction. Throughout the early part of 1943, the MFGB executive was in discussion together with the executive of the Labour Party on the subject of the future organisation of the industry: "Documents had been drafted by the Coal and Power Sub-Committee of the L.P. which provided for a Ministry that would supervise the coal, gas, electricity and by-product industries while each industry would have its own Board. The Federations' Executive Committee agreed that the general principles of the scheme should be adopted as an alternative policy on the expiration of the present form of control. (March 10, 1943)".<sup>9</sup>

Such a prize as nationalisation seemed worth the temporary sacrifices which might, in the meantime, have to be made at the public altar and the sacrifices were made less painful than they might have been by the comforting jingle of spare change in the pockets of miners who had missed that sound for over a decade. Increased wartime demand meant longer and more regular working hours, periodic wage increases and more likelihood of bonus payments.

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8 See Swansea transcript, op.cit., of recording with Emlyn Williams, later South Wales miners' president.

9 R.P. Arnot, "The Miners in Crisis and War", London 1961, p.379.

The combination of patriotism, loyalty to elected leaders, the promise of nationalisation and the receipt of a little more ready cash, served to moderate the strike totals. The indignation concerning the Tareni affair, though widely felt, was contained. The sympathy strikes spread no further east than to the pits of the neighbouring Dulais Valley and no further west than Gwaun-cae-gurwen. From early May to late August 1943, not a single serious strike took place outside of that troubled area.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, certain areas were taking the public appeals for increased productivity very seriously; thus, the Colliery Guardian reported in mid-June that "Many of the pits in the Aberdare Valley have from time to time exceeded their weekly targets."<sup>11</sup> The SWMF Executive Committee continued to hammer the point home to its members that Victory and the post-war Elysium would only be attained if they eradicated time-wasting disputes and restrictive practices. To this end, a special delegate conference held early in July unanimously approved an Executive Committee report which called for maximum unity in the Federation ranks to increase production, and decided that fresh efforts should be made to "restore discipline and to urge that measures be

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10 There was a one shift strike of daywage men at Ffaldydre Colliery No 1. Resolven on 18.6.43. over a wages dispute and a more serious stoppage lasting one day at the nearby Aberpergwm Colliery when 12 surface workers refused underground employment and were thereupon directed to the Craigola Fuel Works by the National Service Officer - a move which they refused. PRO Lab 10/369.

11 C.G., 18.6.43.

adopted to reduce the provocation which ... existed at some pits through management refusing to adopt a 'reasonable attitude'." <sup>12</sup>

The Tarenî strikers and their sympathizers were not the sole targets of this report, however, for by the end of June it was once again becoming clear that the pit-boys were in a state of extreme restlessness. A fresh spate of Boys' Strikes occurred to back up a demand emanating from the boys of the Swansea and Dulais Valleys for "2/- a day danger money". <sup>13</sup>

The demand was quite obviously one which had been agreed upon beforehand by the young strikers. It was plain that there existed amongst the boys a system of communication and organisation which came near to rivalling the official system. The seriousness of this challenge to union discipline was recognised by the SWMF Executive Committee and it acted on this occasion with a little more tact and understanding than had been shown during the 1942 strikes. SWMF reps brought the problem of pit-boys' pay before members of the Coal Owners' Association and requested that adult rates of wages be paid to boys called upon to do adults' work. If the owners did not agree within a fortnight, warned the reps., then the boys would be told to refuse to do adults' work. <sup>14</sup>

A Federation spokesman informed reporters that the position of the boys in the mines called for a "radical improvement ...

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 9.7.43.

<sup>13</sup> PRO, Lab 10/369.

<sup>14</sup> C.G., 9.7.43.

Boys in the mines", he alleged, "still had restricted wages whilst their sisters, sweethearts and mothers were earning considerably more in the factories."<sup>15</sup>

The SWMF initiative succeeded in getting the boys to return to work and by late July the coalfield was completely clear of serious disputes - so clear, in fact, that the SWMF Executive Committee felt itself enabled to send the following cable to General Montgomery:

"On behalf of the 100,000 miners on this coalfield, please convey to the Allied troops in Sicily our congratulations on their heroic achievements, and our faith in their ability to secure all objectives according to plan. We undertake to do all in our power to produce the coal required to sustain the new offensive."<sup>16</sup>

The General's reply ("Please give my best wishes to all South Wales miners and tell them that if they will produce the coal we will finish the job here on the battlefront"<sup>17</sup>) was received shortly before the miners of Powell Duffryn's Penrhiwceiber pit struck work in protest against the alleged non-payment of the minimum wage to three employees. It was a strike which, rightly, was seen both by management and the Federation as constituting a serious and significant departure from past form. The pits of the Aberdare Valley were amongst the most productive on the coalfield, owned almost entirely by the largest and most notorious of all Welsh colliery companies:

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15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., 23.7.43.

17 Ibid., 13.8.43.



Powell Duffryn. For reasons outlined in Part One, they had been relatively free from strikes and go-slows. Only in 1939/40 had the pits' record books been seriously blotted with strike reports and even these had occurred only with the aid of the Powell Duffryn Workmen's Combine Committee during the SWMF's campaign to eradicate non-unionism. Between 1940 and the Spring of 1943 Penrhiwceiber Colliery had remained relatively quiet, as had most others in the Valley.

This apparent pass<sup>66</sup>ivity was not a sign of the workforce's contentment. It could better be described as a silent accumulation of pressure and indignation as grievances were stifled beneath a welter of patriotic demands for increased production. The first release occurred in April 1943 when 1,200 Penrhiwceiber colliers suddenly struck work over the minimum wage issue and were persuaded back only after a four-day stoppage. The lid once again was slammed firmly down and the pressure resumed its build-up.

On August 20th the lid appeared once more to have been blown clean away when the workforce of Penrhiwceiber embarked upon the first of a whole series of strike actions which were to provide local industrial correspondents with publishable material right up to and beyond nationalisation.

The dispute, though immediately centred upon an alleged non-payment of the minimum wage to three colliers, involved much wider issues - all of which were directly attributable to changes in managerial policies which had resulted from the

recent takeover of the pit by the Powell Duffryn Company. The introduction of the notorious yardage-tonnage system of payment had caused great dissatisfaction<sup>18</sup> and the strikers showed themselves to be in no mood for compromise - even when compromise was proposed by Arthur Horner himself.

The SWMF President had been extremely voluble during the strike in advocating increased production. On the second day of the stoppage he had delivered the opening speech to the South Wales Congress of the Communist Party in Cardiff where he informed the delegates that "... victory depended as much on coal as on mighty battles on the fighting fronts. Miners were now in the fighting line." He acknowledged the difficulties which his members faced from day to day; what they needed, he argued, was a "square deal from the Government and the Coalowners", but his message was quite clear: avoid stoppages at all cost, keep production moving.<sup>19</sup>

To achieve this end, the SWMF Executive Committee proposed to the Penrhiwceiber strikers a return to work pending negotiations. The strikers, however, remained quite firm in their resolve to make the Company admit its liability over the minimum wage issue. The situation was summarised by the Ministry of Labour's Industrial Relations Officer:

"The strike of miners at Penrikyber (No.2) Colliery reported last week, originally affected 420 men, but now the number has increased to 1,370. The prime cause of the stoppage

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18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 27.8.43.

was attributed to the alleged underpayment of 3 colliers, but it is probable that the introduction of a new basis of assessing wages, introduced after the colliery was taken over by the P.D. combine earlier in the year, provided the background to the present unrest. Efforts have been made by officials of the SWMF to induce the men to return to work so that the recognised machinery for the settlement of disputes might be put into operation, but most of these efforts have been to no avail. An offer by the Regional Controller of the Ministry of Fuel and Power to hold an inquiry into the men's grievances, as soon as work was resumed, has likewise been ignored. A ballot was taken last Tuesday at which 498 men failed to register their votes <sup>in</sup>resulted in a majority of 284 in favour of continuing this unofficial strike...<sup>20</sup>

There has been a good deal of criticism of this strike in the local press and strong comments regarding the lack of patriotism on the part of the men who deliberately hold up the production of coal at this critical stage in the war."<sup>21</sup>

The "strong comments" did not, however, emanate from the workforces of other Powell Duffryn collieries. Within two days of the drafting of the Industrial Relations Officer's report, it was clear that Penrhiwceiber men had the support of pits which hitherto had been identified mainly by their willingness

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20 Of the 872 votes cast, 578 voted against the recommendation that work be resumed; 294 were in favour. C.G. 27.8.43.

21 PRO, Lab 10/369 RWE 27.8.43.

to comply with the various public demands for increased production. By August 31st, 4½ thousand P.D. employees in the Cynon and Taff Valleys were striking in sympathy, despite the fact that Horner had personally presented to the Penrhiwceiber men the recommendation (made by a specially convened conference of SWMF lodge delegates the previous day) that they should return to work.<sup>22</sup> He stressed, during a packed and "extremely heated" meeting, that production of coal should not be impeded in any way, but the recommendation was almost unanimously rejected.<sup>23</sup> At this point, the Regional Fuel Controller intervened with an announcement that he would begin an immediate inquiry into the whole situation. Owners and men appointed three <sup>representatives</sup> reps each to sit with the Controller on the inquiry and agreed to accept his decision.

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22 The pits which struck in sympathy were as follows:

Cwmcynon	:	550 u/g workers struck	26.8.43.
Abercynon	:	1,050 colliery workers struck	29.8.43.
Deep Duffryn	:	620 " " "	30.8.43.
Abergorki	:	300 " " "	30.8.43.
Albion	:	921 " " "	30.8.43.
Tower	:	1,300 " " "	31.8.43.

PRO Lab 10/369 RWE 31.8.43.

23 There were only 10 dissentients. C.G., 3.9.43.

On the first day of the inquiry, news reached Penrhiwceiber from Pontypridd that a resolution supporting the strikes had been passed by delegates at a meeting there of the P.D. combine committee representing 41 lodges and 40,000 miners. They had agreed to express their support by tendering 14 days notice to obtain a settlement of the minimum wage dispute - notices to be tendered the following Monday (September 6th) and by advising the lodges already on strike to return to work in the meantime. It was also announced from the meeting that "Other matters in the dispute, apart from wages, will be subject of further investigation."<sup>24</sup> This was, indeed, an ominous threat - not only to the Powell Duffryn company, but also to the country's coal supplies and to the SWMF's ability to maintain discipline amongst its members. The Owners' Association countered with a rather lame announcement to the effect that they reaffirmed their standing attitude in the matter of strikes, which was that any dispute could be dealt with immediately work was resumed.<sup>25</sup>

It came as no great surprise, considering the pressure thus impending, that the inquiry found in favour of the miners. After an announcement by the Company that they would pay in full the amounts originally claimed, a general resumption of work took place and the miners of the Aberdare Valley found that by their unofficial action, they had secured their first significant

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

wages victory over the Powell Duffryn Company since 1926.

It would be foolish to assume that the lessons of the Penrhiwceiber struggle had been ignored by the workers involved. They had, after all, observed how, prior to their strike, the negotiations concerning their grievances had dragged on and how little progress had been made. They had heard Horner denounce their actions as being detrimental to the war effort and they had felt the exhilarating sensation which accompanied the awareness that they could call upon the support of the world's largest combine committee of miners, should they need it. The decision of this committee to oppose the official union line was in itself a significant departure from previous form. The Powell Duffryn Combine Committee had never been amongst the most active or militant of its genre and its decision to support the Penrhiwceiber men is an indication of the extensive nature of the changes which the experience of wartime production had wrought upon the consciousness of many mineworkers. An editorial in the Colliery Guardian commented upon the apparent determination of this Committee and of others like it to reject the patriotic arguments of leaders even of Horner's calibre and to adopt, instead, attitudes of opportunistic intransigence which were ill-suited even in peace-time and "utterly condemnable" during the crisis of war.

The strikers and their sympathizers, argued the editor, had it fixed in their minds that getting coal in order to accomplish the downfall of the enemy "... is not quite the same thing as killing him, and", he went on, "we may hazard a suggestion that the disinclination of the Government to recall

men from the Forces for work in the pits has been due in part to a knowledge that any reprieve of this kind would engender discontent and half-heartedness."<sup>26</sup>

This veiled admission that "discontent" not only existed, but that it might even be widespread, was followed by a quite typical "Establishment" diagnosis of the symptoms which led to disrupted production: "... it is conceivable that the miner who would fight valorously on the battlefield often forgets to ask himself whether independent acts of industrial sabotage may not be as heinous as cowardice in the front line and actually do more to impair the national effort."<sup>27</sup>

Such an analysis was at no great variance with that propounded by Horner and his fellow national leaders; indeed, there was a good deal of common ground between these two previously-opposed parties. The Colliery Guardian, representing in its unique fashion the voice of management, complained of the need for pit discipline amongst employees whilst Horner for the SWMF hectored his membership on the need to maintain union discipline. With wartime joint-productivity drives operating in almost every pit, both messages amounted to much the same thing.

The other common charge - that the strikers lacked any real perspective in terms of understanding the gravity of the international crisis - was promptly refuted in the most concrete fashion possible by the workforce of Abergorki colliery which had been the first to stop work in sympathy with the Penrhiwceiber men.

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26 Ibid., 17.9.43.

27 Ibid.

Less than a fortnight after the strike was settled, the Colliery Guardian reported with much enthusiasm that, "This week the Union Jack again flies from the pithead gear of Abergorki Colliery ... where the production target was again exceeded ... The men produced 692 tons more than their quota of 2,490 tons. This pit probably holds the record for South Wales, for the target has been exceeded every week without a break for 4 months."<sup>28</sup>

Far from providing us with evidence of a lack of guts, determination and of a will amongst the men to "work for victory", the Penrhiwceiber strike illustrates how, on the contrary, these qualities were present in abundance during the first four years of the war. The unwillingness of the strikers to compromise (and it was not as if the Penrhiwceiber workforce had a tradition of refusing to compromise<sup>29</sup>) is easily understood if one takes into account the main grievances cited in the inquiry - namely, the non-payment of the minimum wage and the imposition of the yardage-tonnage system of ascertaining wages. Both these grievances were long familiar to Powell Duffryn employees and to the SWMF leadership alike, (see Chapter 3) and if anything concerning the strike should have surprised contemporary observers it should have been the fact that both

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28 Ibid., 24.10.43.

29 Between 1927 and 1939, the pit had the highest number of disputes referred to the Joint Standing Disputes Committee of any pit in South Wales (a total of 69) whilst in terms of the numbers of strikes experienced, it did not rate in the "top 55". See, W.J. Anthony-Jones, op.cit., Appendix E, Tables 1 and 3.



practices were allowed to continue as long as they had done. That they had survived intact was a tribute to Powell Duffryn's ongoing ability to maintain relatively weak and ineffectual Federation Lodges at their pits - even during a period of full employment, job-protection and increased earnings. This may appear, on the surface, to be no mean feat, but one has only to refer back to the immediate pre-war days to discover the reasons for the Company's success, for we have seen in Part 1, the Lodges entered the war still reeling from the double blows of economic depression and defeat in 1926. Any chance of regaining stability and confidence by means of involvement in industrial action was further restricted after the outbreak of war by the Federation's declaration of its intent to ensure uninterrupted production as far as was possible. All rank-and-file action after that point was almost certainly destined to be unofficial - no matter how sound the case.

The situation was thus fraught with unnatural tensions. The onset of war, with its eventual "bonuses" of full employment, job-protection and higher wages, should have brought with it a spontaneous desire to seize the time and reverse the defeats of the previous 15 years. That such a desire emerged is beyond doubt, but it manifested itself in a stunted and mutated form. Like Puritan fathers, Lawther, Horner and their colleagues on the Federation Executives, ensured that all potentially wild passions were bridled and channelled into the pursuit of total victory in the Holy War.

For the frustrated spirits of a great many Powell Duffryn employees, however, the opportunity proved too tempting - though when they struck work they did so like men haunted with guilt and they atoned for their sins by increasing production at the earliest possible moment.

The same atonement was not as readily forthcoming from those other and more perpetual transgressors - the pit boys. Just over a month after the settlement of the Penrhiwceiber strike and 15 months after their last concerted action, the pit boys struck again. By the middle of October 1943, 15 collieries were affected, with nearly 700 boys on strike and over 5,200 men either taking direct action in support of the boys or unable to work owing to the absence of the youngsters.<sup>30</sup>

The boys gave as reasons for striking the "meagreness of the wage rates for youths laid down by Lord Portal's Committee and the desire to secure an improvement."<sup>31</sup> The Regional Industrial Relations Officer expressed the belief that the boys were "actually receiving more than the minimum rates prescribed" and complained that the efforts of the SWMF officials to obtain a resumption of work had proved repeatedly to be unsuccessful.<sup>32</sup> Neither he nor the SWMF officials appeared unduly worried by this latest development, however, for, as he recorded in his weekly report, "the opinion has been expressed by a representative of the Ministry of Fuel and Power - an opinion which is apparently shared

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30 PRO, Lab 10/369, RWE 15.10.43.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

with the SWMF officials - that a couple of weeks without pay will bring the irresponsible element to their senses and that most likely a period of stability will follow a resumption of work."<sup>33</sup>

The smugness underlying these predictions was only partly justifiable. It proved no easy task to get the hard core of strikers at the pits around Gwaun-cae-gurwen back to work. Indeed, the Industrial Relations Officer was forced to record 10 days after the strike had begun that there was no indication of any inclination on the part of the boys to call it off and he added the gloomy postscript ... "It remains to be seen whether these youths have arrived at the point where they are prepared to be disciplined by their trade union official."<sup>34</sup>

17 days after the strike had begun, boys in five collieries continued to hold out and there appeared, generally, to be little chance of a "period of stability" following even their reticent return to work. The Officer reported at the end of October that "Cases of indiscipline on the part of organised workers continue to arise and we are very much concerned at their frequency. These domestic troubles cause endless embarrassment to Trade Union Officials and tend to destroy the confidence that has been inspired by the disciplined authority in the Trade Union movement in past years."<sup>35</sup>

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33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., RWE 22.10.43.

35 Ibid.

The boys' "irregular" action was condemned by the SWMF and the Workmen's Combine Committee of the Amalgamated Anthracite meeting at Ammanford. A delegate Conference of the Federation at Cardiff on October 25th adopted a motion requesting them to return to work under the assurance that the interest of the workers throughout the coalfield were being "safeguarded and advanced as far as possible by the Federation". Sectional action was condemned and it was stated that the Federation, "to maintain the discipline and authority of its ranks, would observe only majority decisions reached by constitutional methods."<sup>36</sup>

By 29th October almost all the remaining boys had returned to work, but the backlash directed against the unions by management and owners had only just begun. Rumblings of discontent had been heard emanating from these ranks ever since the introduction of the Essential Work Order in May 1941. The strikes at Tareni and Penrhiwceiber, together with those involving the boys, amplified the rumbles into a roar. Not content with accusing union leaders of being unable to impose discipline upon their members, the managers and their allies went further and accused so-called "responsible" union officers and Labour M.P.s of actually stirring up the trouble. At a meeting of the South Wales Colliery Managers Association in late November 1943, for example, one of the most distinguished of the South Wales mining engineers, John Kane, informed his audience that, in his opinion, the reason for the trouble and discontent in mining was that the industry "supported so many paid agitators". One had only to look in the first place, to the large numbers of miners' M.P.s, he said. Many of them were "reasonable members of

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36 C.G., 29.10.43.

the community contributing to a peaceful and prosperous industry." There were others, however, who "throve on causing trouble."<sup>37</sup> He alleged that behind the M.P.s were members of the miners' executive and miners' agents, most of whom had reached their position "by means of possessing a slick tongue and an aptitude for causing trouble over trifling things." Behind these there were the local lodge officials, committeemen and checkweighers ... "frequently being pushed out of office by other ambitious and more aggressive newcomers." It was, he argued, "this continuous and sustained competition for office by some men at most collieries" that caused "90% of the labour troubles" and he added that, in his opinion, the future held little promise of improvement: "Young entrants to the industry in recent years would, because of the Essential Work Order, have been trained in an atmosphere of indiscipline and laxity. When reasonable authority began to operate there (would) be resentment. When peace is declared," he went on, "the tap of agitation will be fully opened, strikes will be as frequent as after the last war, demands for nationalisation

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37 C.G., 29.10.43.

Kane was no doubt here referring to Nye Bevan's much publicised conflict with Morrison, Hogg and others over the inadequacies, as he saw them, of the Government's proposed new Workmen's Compensation Bill. He considered that the proposed increases in payment were insufficient and drew up an amendment to rectify matters. Morrison argued that if the amendment were carried the Bill would be withdrawn. He, Bevan, replied to this threat by warning the Home Secretary that if he "sank to such despicable depths" he would "stump the coalfields and get them on strike in a fortnight". Hogg declared that Bevan had shown himself in his true colours as "an enemy of democracy, of the country, and of the organized working-class movement." Isaacs, speaking unofficially on behalf of the TUC had supported the Bill and the Miners' M.P.'s amendment (introduced by Ness Edwards) was defeated by 153 votes to 42.

will persist, and the drop in output will be such that control will be removed and it will be left, as last time, to the managers to pull the industry round ... Wages will fall."<sup>38</sup>

Kane was backed up by the Owners' faithful mouthpiece, the Western Mail, which suggested in a leading article that the heavy bombing of the Ruhr "appeared to have affected output in Germany to a less extent than the long series of sporadic and illegal strikes have affected output in this country."<sup>39</sup>

Horner issued a spirited reply, pointing out that notwithstanding the experiences through which the South Wales miners had passed during the inter-war years, they were giving loyal support to the country in the prosecution of the war. The officials of the Miners' Federation, he said, had, in spite of all difficulty, maintained orderly relations in the industry<sup>40</sup> and he went on to argue that the attempt by Kane to convey the impression that these officials were "incapable or fearful of standing up to tendencies which would interfere with the effective prosecution of the war is a slander, and a shameful one at that. Mr. Kane knows, no one better, that had it not been for the courage displayed by the officials of the Federation at the centre, in the districts, and at the pits, in their determination to implement the motion passed in favour

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38 C.G., 26.11.43.

39 Quoted in Industrial Relations Officer's Report Week Ending 26.11.43., PRO Lab 10/369.

40 Ibid.

of the prosecution of the war against the Nazis, the South Wales coalfield would have been in a state of anarchy."<sup>41</sup>

The very fact that orderly relations had been maintained, "despite the inflammatory situation during the years of war," was in itself "the complete answer to people holding the views of Mr. Kane", said Horner and he went on to allege that there had been no section of the British community which had been subjected to such terrible experiences as had the South Wales miners during the inter-war years and thus, "no section (was) entitled to greater resentment against forces which subjected them to those experiences ...". "Today," he warned the managers, "there is no section of the working class in Britain which is so powerful, if it chooses to exercise its power. We do not exercise the power", he informed them, "not because we are not aware of possessing it, but because we place the general and permanent interests of the people of this country and of the working class generally in a position of greater importance than our own sectional and temporary interests."<sup>42</sup>

This was Horner's clearest and most articulate explanation of the SWMF Executive's wartime position. As well as constituting a very forceful denial of Kane's charges, it also carried a clearly implied condemnation of those Federation members who indulged too frequently in unofficial actions - though the condemnation was a carefully considered one in as much as it took into account the many and recent historical roots of the bitterness and frustration

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<sup>41</sup> C.G., 17.12.43.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

which caused such actions in the first place. Above all, it conveyed an image of SWMF officials as responsible, even altruistic, individuals who represented and led a workforce which had disciplined itself in the country's hour of greatest need.

The month which followed the public row brought with it mixed support for Horner's case. Thirteen separate pit strikes occurred, but all of them took place, true to form, in the areas around Gwaun-cae-gurwen and the Upper Swansea and Dulais Valleys. Only one took place in the very much larger non-anthracite section of the field, and that was a walk out by 600 miners at P.J. & J.P.'s Vivian Colliery at Abertillery in sympathy with clerical and administrative staff who were striking in an attempt to gain recognition within the Company's pits for the Clerical and Administrative Workers' Union. The Vivian workforce was promptly ordered back to work by the SWMF Executive which issued a statement declaring that whilst the Federation was "fully in sympathy with the clerks", it nevertheless refused to identify itself actively with the dispute.<sup>43</sup>

In the middle of December, Horner received support for his analysis from a rather more unexpected quarter. Addressing the annual general meeting of the great Ocean Coal Combine, Lord Davies (always the least obviously reactionary of the big coalowners) said that he found it difficult to understand why, in spite of all the efforts and appeals that had been made, there

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43 PRO, Lab 10/369, RWE 7.12.43.



should be still a "falling-off of output" in the coal industry. The only explanation which he could imagine was that the majority of men "allowed themselves to be victimised and dishonoured by a small minority of men, and especially of boys, who appeared to be incapable of realising their duties as citizens or of responding to patriotic appeals to support their comrades on the battlefield. Until the majority were prepared to assert themselves", he continued, "to exert pressure on the minority, and to support their leaders and the Government in their appeals for a bigger output, the situation - already critical - was bound to deteriorate."<sup>44</sup>

This was not, however, the view expressed generally by colliery managers in South Wales. There were, they admitted, pits on the coalfield in which the co-operation of the workforce was forthcoming<sup>45</sup> but these were far from being typical. The South Wales branch of the National Association of Colliery Managers passed a resolution in late December 1943 which was

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44 C.G., 17.12.43. Some measure of the disenchantment of "youths" with the pits was provided in the same week as Lord Davies issued his analysis; it was announced in the Colliery Guardian that "Only three from a total of 214 youths who registered at Doncaster last week for National Service expressed a preference for work in the mines. 25 youths from 2 mining villages all chose the Forces. Of 250 who registered at Newcastle-on-Tyne, only 2 volunteered for the Mines."

45 The Two Abergorki entries, 17.12.43. and 31.12.43. C.G.

sent to the Minister of Fuel and Power, declaring that unless he agreed to meet them within 14 days to discuss their complaints under the E.W.O., they would refuse to take part in the work of the pit production committees:

"We are unanimous", they declared, "that we cannot any longer assume the responsibilities laid upon us to carry out the provisions of the Coal Mines Act and its regulations, in view of the complete lack of discipline now existing in the mines. Strikes, threats of strikes, and deliberate acts of sabotage and withholding of efforts by the workmen have been permitted with negligible disciplinary action by your Ministry. This can no longer be tolerated."<sup>46</sup>

It was a threat which was condemned by the Minister of Fuel as well as by Horner who described it as an "outburst ... timed as a political demonstration" and based on "vague, unproved statements".<sup>47</sup> Lawther saw it as a "deliberate planned scheme to have the law of the jungle operating at the pits ... confusion and chaos ... rather than a well organised, planned industry."<sup>48</sup> Both miners' leaders lost no time in using the managers' threat as evidence of a last-ditch stand by the Owners and their allies against the overwhelming arguments being presented in favour of nationalisation. The managers, declared Horner, feared that the Government's reorganisation of the coal machinery might prejudice their position. Many managers had

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<sup>46</sup> C.G., 24.12.43.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 31.12.43.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

commended the assistance received from Federation members of pit committees. On the other hand, there was ample evidence that the committees had been rendered ineffective by the refusal of other managers to adopt any suggestion from the workmen's reps. There was no possibility, he emphasised, of the Federation agreeing to the restoration of arbitrary power to colliery managers, or anybody else, over a workman's right to a job: "Managers should face the fact that they must devise a changed relationship towards labour. They must secure co-operation by consent, and this could only come through a different attitude and treatment of the workmen."

These were not the sounds of a managerial stooge at work. If Horner had appeared to many of his more obviously militant members to have become, by 1943, a trifle too "collaborationist" in his regular condemnation of unofficial actions, it was not because his sympathies, like those of so many illustrious leaders before him, had been won over to a pro-managerial standpoint. It was almost certainly because he saw the situation drawing closer than ever it had before of converting into reality the old dream of a nationalised coal industry.

The managerial intransigence and threats of non-co-operation must have appeared to him as heaven-sent opportunities for proving to the British public who within the industry most faithfully held the country's welfare closest to their hearts. These were opportunities which could be used to prove that it was the Owners and their managers, and not the mineworkers, who were the real

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"saboteurs". But in order that he might provide the most effective proof, he needed immediate and concrete evidence that it was he who was calling the tune within the union, and not those (allegedly) anarchic elements amongst his membership which hitherto had attracted so much unfavourable attention. This was Horner's dilemma; there had been few times since 1926 when the coalfield had found itself in a state of greater industrial agitation than it found itself in during the late Winter and Spring of 1943/44. His task was to attempt to convince his union's members that they would best be served, not by exercising the kinds of unofficial, direct action which had brought them immediate results - most recently, of course, during the highly publicised Penrhiwceiber strike - but by placing their trust in, and lending their unanimous support to, the constitutional efforts in negotiation of their elected leaders in South Wales and London.

Some idea of the formidable dimensions of this task was communicated to the readership of the Reynolds News late in 1943 in the form of an article by the secretary of the Tower Lodge, Bob Condon, who, like Horner, was also a member of the Communist Party and had, in addition, served for 17 months in the International Brigades in Spain. He wrote: "The bad old days are not gone. It is with great difficulty that miners' leaders are averting stoppages provoked by the owners. The South Wales coalfield is just about ready to blow the lid off ...

"People outside the industry who talk so glibly do not understand how much more difficult coal-getting is in war than in peace. For example, the timber we now obtain is inferior

and much more difficult to handle than previously. To stand a post now is three times as much work, though we still get paid only 3s 10d (sic) for it. Steel substitutes are scarce.

"Already here some people with calloused buttocks are calling us traitors. I wish to state here definitely that we miners are anti-Fascist to a man - whether the Fascism be German, Italian or British.

"We love our land, but not the rulers thereof. We are free fighters, not driven curs. We are not Cinderellas but rather prometheus, chained with the chains of greed and avarice.

"We are like a bull in the arena wanting to get at the hated matador but distracted by the darts and cloaks of the toreadors. Clear the ring and we will produce an avalanche of coal to bury Hitler. We want nationalisation ...

"We sit on the floor amid the ammonia of horses. The twentieth century of Christian progress with a vengeance - nibbling cheese in a hole like a rat. We have not got our old stamina : we need more meat.

"They can build canteens and concert halls in ordnance factories, which private enterprise hopes to buy cheaply after the war. But most mine canteens are housed in cockroach ridden, old converted colliery buildings ...

"Our problems are economic and psychological. We have long memories and bitter hatred for the "great who trod our fathers down, who steal our children's bread, whose hands of greed are stretched to rob the living and the dead."

"We have tried co-operation on Pit Production Committees. You should see their faces if we level any criticism against the owners; and look out for reprisals.

"We have sacrificed principles; the owners have sacrificed nothing. You cannot co-operate with a manager who is compelled to answer to a private company in a national struggle."<sup>49</sup>

Condon's analysis provides a clear picture of the monumental task which faced the Federation's leaders as they attempted to alleviate the grievances of their members. Their problems included negotiating an end to dual control whereby pit production committees were responsible to the State but the managers were responsible to the Owners; the award of more power to the workers in the industry; the compulsory infusion of water on all coal faces to combat dust; an assurance that miners would receive a decent basic wage independent of price lists - all of which should anyway be abolished; riddance of the "consideration" and "allowance" rackets" in payment of wages; an increase in the miner's meat ration; the immediate construction of sufficient and adequately staffed hot dinner canteens and pithead baths at all mines; the provision of X-ray departments for miners, with compulsory examinations at regular periods; hygienic facilities in all mines, and the provision of places underground "where a man can sit and eat like a human being"; democratic conscription of labour: "If labour is to be conscripted, as Bevin says, then we want to see some college boys and patriotic M.P.s sons beside our

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<sup>49</sup> Reynolds News cutting, Miners' Library, Swansea: Tower colliery envelope.

boys",; the drawing up of a "charter of mining" which would guarantee wages and conditions, cover all phases of work, and be drafted by working miners."<sup>50</sup>

Despite abundant evidence of the extreme disquiet engendered by the non-fulfillment of these demands, however, the Regional Controller of Production could find it in his heart to come forward only with a "New Year Message" which, for diplomatic lameness and bankruptcy of imagination, was unrivalled throughout the festive season. After thanking the miners of South Wales for their "co-operation" during 1943, he stated that he "could not, however, ignore the fact that in certain places in the region the efforts which one would naturally expect in the existing circumstances have not been forthcoming, and unnecessary difficulties have been raised to the detriment of the output and reputation of the area."<sup>51</sup> He received, two months later, a reply from the mining workforce which would have left him in little doubt as to the nature of its opinion concerning his grossly limited response to their demands. It addressed itself to the inadequacies of the Porter pay award and took the form of the most widespread wave of pit strikes witnessed on the coalfield since 1931.

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50 Ibid.

51 C.G., 7.1.44.

## Chapter Nine

### Normality Almost Returned 1944-1947

#### 1. The Porter Award Strikes

"... in the whole year 1944 the number involved in mining disputes were no less than 568,000. The duration in working days of all disputes that year was 2,480,000, a figure that had only once been exceeded in the previous seventeen years. But a still more significant figure is the number of disputes, big and small. There were no less than 1,253 disputes in 1944, half as many again as in the preceding year, 1943, which year had the highest total of disputes since the beginning of the century."<sup>1</sup>

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1 R. Page-Arnot, op.cit., p.396.

Statistics regarding major disputes, January-April, 1944.

Coalfield	No. of work- people affected	Date when dispute		Aggregate duration in working days
		Began	Ended	
Lancashire	19,000	Jan 24	Feb 5	300,000
Staffordshire	17,000	Jan 28	Feb 5	
Yorkshire	15,500	Jan 31	Feb 14	
Durham	7,400	Feb 24-29	Feb 25-29	
Scotland	15,000	Mar 8	Mar 20	550,000
S. Wales & Mon	100,000	Mar 6*	Mar 18	
Yorkshire	120,000	Mar 16	Apr 11	1,000,000

\* The wave actually began in S. Wales on 25.1.44. in the Garw Valley, see page 380.



As a result of national arbitration, the miners in January 1944 were awarded a national minimum wage of £5 per week underground and £4.10s above ground, together with certain other concessions. The award was a landmark in mining history.<sup>2</sup> Until the Second World War, mining had been the only major industry in which the employers refused to negotiate wages and conditions on a national basis. Instead, they clung to the practice of fixing agreements by district:

"Though a wage a little above subsistence level might be paid in the newer, more prosperous coalfields (such as Notts and Derby)," wrote one observer in 1944, "the existence of lower wage standards in other districts, especially those, like Durham and South Wales, which suffered most from the loss of export markets, acted as a brake on standards in the higher-paid areas. The strategy of "divide and rule" was employed by the mine-owners with a good deal of success between the wars. For example, different district agreements expired at different times: the owners, in negotiating a new agreement, never had to face a united body of men."<sup>3</sup>

The differences, in terms of earnings per manshift, between districts were often significant. In 1938, for example, the average miner in Durham earned 9s 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ d for a shift's work. In South Wales he earned 10s 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ d; in Yorkshire 12s 6d, and in North Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, 13s 3d.<sup>4</sup> For almost a decade after 1926, the miners' union was too weak to do anything about these anomalies and it was not until 1935 that the leadership felt itself capable of threatening the owners with strike action if they refused to discuss a national wage increase. Even then, little

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2 See, M. Heinemann, *op.cit.*, Chapter II, pp.38-63.

3 *Ibid.*, pp.47-48.

4 *Ibid.*

real progress was made until the beginning of the war when the Government introduced a number of financial measures aimed at subsidising the weaker mining companies and districts out of general price increases. Uniform war wage advances for all districts were agreed upon through the auspices of the Greene Board.<sup>5</sup>

Even at the end of 1943, after the increases of the Greene Award, the miner was receiving little more, in terms of real wages, for a given output than he was in 1924, and very much less than in 1920-1:

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5 In its case to the Green Board the union claimed that a minimum of £5 a week was necessary in 1942 to maintain a family of a miner, his wife and three children in health. The so-called Greene Award still left "hundreds of thousands" below this level. (M. Heinemann, *op.cit.*, p.51). The Award did, however, lift the miners' earnings up the wages league. In 1938, they were placed eighty-first in the official list of average earnings for industries; after the Greene Award they occupied twenty-third place. (Ibid.)

TABLE ONE

Real Wages and Output per Man-shift

(1924 = 100)

	Wages per shift index	Cost of living index	Real wage per shift	Output per shift index
1920	142	146.5	97	86
1921 <sup>1</sup>	180	142	127	82
1922 <sup>2</sup>	119	120	99	101
1926 <sup>3</sup>	98	98.5	98.5	105
1927	94.5	95.5	99	117
1931	86.5	84.5	102	123
1935	87	81.5	107	133
1937	100	88.5	113	133
1943	177 <sup>4</sup>	135 <sup>5</sup>	131 <sup>4</sup>	117

Source : Margot Heinemann, op.cit., p.54.

1. January-March
2. October-March
3. First four months
4. January
5. Based on index for 1942 given in White Paper on National Income, April 1943, adjusted to include indirect taxation.

Between 1938 and 1943 earnings per shift increased by 65%<sup>6</sup>. The cost of living, meanwhile rose by approximately 50%<sup>7</sup> which meant an increase in real wages was just 11%. At the end of 1943 the Federation demanded a national adult minimum wage of £6 a week for underground workers and £5 10s a week for surface workers, with corresponding rises for piece-workers. The executive backed up the claim by stating that great difficulties were created by the "unsatisfactory comparison of wages as between the mining industry and other industries." It argued that there was "no reason why wages in the mining industry should not compare favourably with those in any other industry in this country ... It is true that wage standards in the mining industry have been increased during the war by way of national flat-rate advances, but we cannot disregard the fact that a very large proportion of the workmen in the industry have for many years, prior to the war, been expected to live 'on the minimum'. Workmen fear that the war advances will be taken away from them following the cessation of hostilities, hence their concern as to the standard of the operating minimum."<sup>8</sup>

The executive also demanded an immediate decision by the Government to continue after the war the guaranteed working week and the national minimum wage, both of which had been introduced through the Essential Work Order. The Government responded

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6 Ministry of Labour Gazette, June 1943.

7 The Treasury's White Paper on National Income, April 1943.

8 Quoted in M. Heinemann, op.cit., pp.55-56

by appointing a wages tribunal under Lord Porter which, in January 1943, established a national minimum wage of £5 per week for underground miners and £4 10s for surface workers - a big increase for men on the minimum in areas like Durham and South Wales; a small increase in areas like Scotland and no increase at all in the highest-paid districts like Notts and Derby. As one contemporary observer pointed out, the value of the award lay in the fact that it raised the standard of the lower-paid districts and gave a "firm national basis" from which further demands for increases were able to be made.<sup>9</sup>

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9 Ibid. A new award was also made on national minimum wages for young miners. In July 1942, the Forster Committee had expressed the view that national minima should be established. The owners, however, refused to negotiate the matter on a national basis and delayed settlement for over a year. The problem was made more acute by the conscription of Bevin boys, many of whom found it impossible to keep themselves on a wage of 44s a week during training. A special Arbitration tribunal granted a general increase in the minimum for all ages. Henceforward, a boy of 14 would earn 38s 6d below ground and 31s 6d above ground; a boy of 16 48s and 40s 6d respectively; an 18 year old 70s and 60s, and a twenty year old 80s and 70s. (M. Heinemann, *op.cit.*, pp. 56-57).

Other advances gained through the Porter Award were payment for overtime at time rates plus one third, and for weekend work at double time (flat-rate advances to be included in the rates so reckoned), and payment for a week's holiday at a rate based on weekly average earnings of all workers.

But if the Porter Award encapsulated an increase in the minimum wage, it offered no corresponding advance in piece-work prices. It tended, therefore, to reduce the differentials between skilled and non-skilled labour. It also declined to propose any increase to skilled workers who previously were paid rates above the minimum. This, in itself, would have provided more than enough reason in the minds of most skilled and piece-workers to take industrial action, but the situation was further aggravated by what appeared to be a Governmental double-cross of monumental proportions. As one contemporary observer recorded, the miners were left with the impression that the Government was "prepared to meet from the national financial pool the cost of rectifying such anomalies, (as would result from an implementation of the Porter Award proposals) and the district unions, under this impression, negotiated agreements to restore the differential rates for skilled men. After these agreements had been signed in many districts, the Government announced that it would not allow payment for anomalies from the national pool (the Coal Charges Account); from which the cost of making up wages to the minimum was being met, and the agreements were thus nullified."<sup>10</sup>

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10 M. Heinemann, *op.cit.*, p.60.

The government afterwards stated officially that they had informed the owners of their attitude: "If this is so", wrote Heinemann, "it would seem impossible to avoid the conclusion that the strikes were deliberately provoked by the owners, since they certainly did not pass on their information to the miners." *Ibid.*

In addition, the Award defined the Minimum Wage in such a way as to include the value of payment in kind - mainly subsidised housing and concessionary coal - and any payments of special allowances for extra responsibilities below ground or for working in especially wet or dusty conditions. Thus, "... a man on 94s a week working in a normal place would get 6s increase under the Porter Award, but a man on the same rate in a dusty place, getting 6s a week allowance, would receive no increase."<sup>11</sup>

The first strike on the coalfield took place on January 24th, three days before the special MFGB Conference which accepted the recommendations included in the Porter Award (and which sparked off strikes in Lancashire, Cannock Chase, N. Staffs., Yorkshire, Ayrshire and Fife<sup>12</sup>). The Lodge which led the strike in South Wales was that of Ffalda<sub>u</sub> in the Garw Valley and it was joined the next day (January 25th) by the three Garw lodges of the Ocean Workmen's Combine Committee.<sup>13</sup>

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- 11 Ibid., p.61. At a delegate conference on 3rd March, Horner outlined the situation. He said that the value of cheap coal supply in the district had been agreed on as 1/6 a week. This sum was to be accounted for as part of the wages of those miners who were entitled to cheap coal (heads of families) and who were benefitting from the Porter Award. All underground and surface workers who already earned more than the Porter minimum of £5 and £4.10s would not be affected. The others, about 25% of the workmen on the coalfield, would receive 1/6d a week less than they would get if the cheap coal were not taken into account. Miners not receiving cheap coal, or who did not benefit by the Award, were not affected. C.G. 10.3.44.
- 12 Lancashire and Cheshire was the only Federated district to oppose the MFGB Executive Committee's resolution of acceptance, and, on January 27th, 15,000 South Lancashire and Cheshire men struck work, along with 10,000 of their Cannock Chase comrades.
- 13 i.e. Glengarw, Garw and International.

That it was these four Lodges which struck first is highly significant. For, as we have seen in the previous chapter, it was here, in the Garw Valley, in June 1942, that *there* occurred one of the most vociferous internecine union conflicts of the war. The issue then was the problem posed to the union's leadership by the Boys' Strike and by the support given to the strikers by the Miners' Agent, Dai Rolf Llewellyn. At Glengarw Colliery, matters had been made even more complicated by the fact that the Boys had been supported by some of the older colliers and it can have come as no great surprise to the South Wales miners' leaders to discover that it was these same lodges which appeared most eager to express their frustration with the Porter Award by striking unofficially.

Even more significant, perhaps, was the fact that it was Ffaldau, and not Glengarw, which actually struck first. The Lodge was not a member of the militant and well-organised Ocean Combine Committee, but, like Penrhiwceiber, it had recently been acquired by the Powell Duffryn Company from Cory Brothers and, like the employees of Penrhiwceiber, those of Ffaldau had been experiencing, at first hand, the so-called "P.D. System" (of work discipline, organisation and payment) which elsewhere had gained for itself such notoriety.

It needs little imagination to link the two actions together: coincidence would provide too weak an explanation for the fact that two of the most disruptive of wartime strikes



originated at pits which recently had been acquired by Powell Duffryn. In addition, both pits had experienced strikes during the month preceeding both of the serious disputes. At Ffaldau, for example, some 50 colliers had struck in support of the pit's aggrieved youths<sup>14</sup>. The workforces of both collieries appeared determined to communicate to their new employers that they were not about to sit back and watch as the Company dismantled their carefully constructed pit customs and practices.

In the coalfield generally, the mood of the men was extremely restless: the first 18 days of the new year had brought with them no fewer than 14 serious stoppages, including the first three Rhondda stoppages to have taken place since early 1941. All three of these pits were owned by Powell Duffryn and all three previously had formed integral parts of the old Cambrian Workmen's Combine Committee.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, it was pits belonging to another Combine Committee - the Amalgamated Anthracite - which dominated the strike lists in February during the interim between the ending of the Garw Valley Porter Award strikes and the beginning of the coalfield anti Porter strikes. These pits were centred upon Gwaur-cae-gurwen; there were five of them and they witnessed, between them, no fewer than 14 strikes between late January and early March 1944.<sup>16</sup>

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14 PRO, Lab 10/446, RWE 4.1.44: 50 Colliers at Penrhiwceiber No.3 struck work between December 31st - January 1st over a refusal to work at the Minimum Rate.

RWE 11.1.44: 110 Colliers struck work at 'Kyber No. 1 on 5th January over a dispute involving allocation of working places, and 19 collier boys and 47 colliers and daywage men struck at Ffaldau on January 5th over a dispute involving the same issue.

15 The pits were the Anthony (part of the Naval Colliery at Tonypany), the Cambrian (Clydach Vale) and the Glamorgan at Llwynypia. PRO, Lab 10/446, Reports for weeks ending 4.1.44., 11.1.44., and 18.1.44.

16 The pits were Steer, Maerdy, East, Gelliceidrim, and Cwmgorse, PRO, Lab 10/446, Reports for weeks ending 25.1.44., 1.2.44., 8.2.44., 15.2.44., 22.2.44., and 7.3.44.;

When the coalfield strike proper began on 6th March, it proceeded to spread like an orderly contagion; beginning with 50-60 Monmouthshire pits which struck on the first day, affecting the Aberdare Valley the following day (when the Abergorki pit joined those on strike, even though it had broken its production record for 40 consecutive weeks) as it did the Powell Duffryn pits of the Rhymney Valley and

the pits of the Vale of Neath and upper-Dulais Valley. On the 8th, pits struck work in the Maesteg, Garw, Ogmore and Rhondda Valleys and, on the 9th, throughout the anthracite field.<sup>17</sup>

The SWMF Executive, their faces turned firmly against such unofficial action, had previously set aside Saturday, March 11th, as the day upon which a Conference was to be convened to "consider the position as it may exist", but, as one historian has since commented, "That phrase was wishful thinking; the call for a resumption of work went unheeded despite the alacrity with which miners' agents and lodge officials harangued the men ... By Thursday (the 9th) the figures were 90,000 men and 175 pits (on strike) whilst the first pay-day under the Award, Friday, served to underline the anomalies feared over reductions in the concessionary home-coal and housing allowances. By the weekend the strike was almost complete in the South Wales coalfield - it had occurred despite 'official' advice."<sup>18</sup>

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17 PRO, Lab 10/446, RWE 7.3.44. and David Smith, unpublished manuscript: Chapter on the South Wales coalfield during the Second World War; Craig Cefn Parc, Pontypridd.

18 D. Smith, op.cit.

On Friday the 10th, the Regional Industrial Relations Officer reported to his Ministry that 190 pits had closed down and that 97,000 colliery workers out of a total of 110,000, were on strike.<sup>19</sup> On the 17th, he reported that the strike was virtually over and that the bulk of the men had returned to work but commented that the process of resumption was "... not as speedy as might have been expected ... throughout the week curious incidents were reported of men arriving at the pit-head, ready for work, but returning home after holding a brief meeting. At some pits, men actually worked a whole shift but on learning that the following shifts had not decided to resume, refused to return until a day or two later."<sup>20</sup> Will Paynter recalled that initially he had been able, as an Agent, to get the lodge committees and mass-meetings in his District to accept the Porter Award and to continue working: "In the event, however, and this was the position throughout the country, they went to work on the Monday following the meetings, (i.e. 6th March) but other pits were out, with the result that for a whole week the position was one of complete chaos with some men on strike and others working, some men going in and coming out like a concertina."<sup>21</sup>

Paynter alleges that a great many of the strikers did not fully appreciate the benefits of the Award:

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19 PRO, Lab 10/446, RWE 10.3.44.

20 Ibid., RWE 17.3.44.

21 W. Paynter, op.cit., p.123.

"Logically", he wrote, "the principle of the minimum wage calculation was sound, but logic has little force in some situations and this was one such occasion. Although the award was finally accepted, the assessment of payments in kind in its calculation was short-lived." 22

This is an interesting analysis of the strikes for it indicates the gap which existed by 1943/44 between the overall perspectives of, on the one hand, the miners' elected leaders and, on the other, large numbers of working miners. The strikers communicated through their actions a sense of being concerned primarily with the protection of local customs and practices with regard to the methods of wages allocation. The leaders, meanwhile, appeared far more concerned with achieving advances on a much wider front. Neither set of perspectives were as uncomplicated as this however. Most strikers welcomed the new minimum rate - even though it fell short of the £6 which they originally had demanded. Their actions were provoked more by suspicion of government trickery than by hostility to the broader terms of the Agreement. They were afraid that its application would erode further the allowances and concessions which they had secured for themselves over the years. Their reaction was understandably insular. They had just lived through a decade during which their customs and practices had been subjected to a concerted assault by a number of coal combine companies. Suspicion was more than warranted.

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It caused dismay amongst the union leaders who had pressed the wages claim and obtained what they considered an important and progressive advance. Add to this the fact that the full weight of the majority of influential leaders was thrown firmly behind the cause of maintaining maximum production for the impending invasion of France and it becomes clear that the potential for internecine conflict within the union was very considerable. Some of the resulting tensions were described with candid accuracy by Horner in his Presidential Address at the April 1944 SWMF Conference.

The strikes had ended just over a month earlier and Horner stressed that it was " ... indeed a tense and graphic moment in history". The only thing on the domestic front which could prevent an Allied victory in 1944, he argued, was a shortage of coal - a shortage which could be prevented "If we all - Government, public and miners - profit from the unhappy experiences of the past year, then we can cement a triple alliance of a new kind, one which will be of incalculable value in the drive to produce the coal which Britain so urgently requires, and which can be produced under conditions which will reflect credit and not discredit upon the nation."<sup>23</sup>

This plea for nationalisation served as a softener. It set heads nodding in agreement throughout the Conference chamber. He moved in closer to his errant audience like a boxer throwing feint punches, lining up his victims for the blow which would land them firmly back on the official line. "I consider it my duty", he

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23 SWMF Annual Conference Report, 1944, "Presidential Address", p.4.

admitted, "to state categorically that so far as the strike in South Wales was concerned, the responsibility for this must be placed directly upon the shoulders of the Government. Ministers were made aware in good time that the Porter Award had produced so called anomalies, and that they should be removed so as to make the Porter Award workable. The South Wales Executive Committee met the South Wales Mineowners, with the knowledge of the Government, to find a formula, which, had it been applied, would have raised coal production, and would have prevented all danger of a disastrous stoppage.

"The sudden decision of the Government made after our negotiations with the Coalowners had been completed, to disown the results of these negotiations was a major political blunder from which we have been struggling ever since to recover."

But at this point, with his audience primed with indignation against the bunglers of Westminster, he switched his attack: " ... we should have resisted the provocation and refused to resort to strike action. The failure to do this has led to grave misunderstandings between workers in the armed forces and ourselves, and to our discredit in the eyes of millions who had previously sympathised with our claims, and who are now being urged to join our enemies in resistance to our just efforts to raise the standards of our people." Like a puritan father admonishing his adolescent child, he continued to harangue the audience: "With our experience as organised workers, we should have been strong in our faith in the Federation -

strong enough to defeat any form or provocation, whether it comes from the Government, the Coalowners, or from irresponsible elements in our own ranks. It would indeed prove to be a terrible thing for us if the pro-Fascists in our own country could postpone the Second Front, which alone can terminate this terrible war on the grounds that the miners - the outstanding opponents of Fascism - had refused to provide the coal essential to a successful invasion."

Not content, however, with providing a simple reminder that there was a war on, he emphasised his plea for union discipline with still more guilt-inspiring images: "Every day the war is prolonged means greater misery and bereavement, which we by our efforts can help to avoid. I know of the senseless rumours and wrong interpretations which were given to our members, and would urge for the future greater faith in the organisation we have so laboriously built up and in the leadership you have democratically elected.

"I would especially plead for loyalty from our youth", he continued, pointing out to them that they had not yet understood how easy it was to "... break the power and authority of a great Trade Union, and how difficult it is to build it up again". Then followed the analysis: "I am certain that we do not suffer from the lack of class solidarity, for this is inherent in every South Wales mineworker. We do, however, suffer from an underestimation of the work the Federation has done to raise the status of mineworkers and

to advance our claims to still further improvements by winning the support of millions of people in this country, upon whom our success must ultimately depend."<sup>24</sup>

Painted, as it was, across the broadest canvas available to him, Horner's argument was impossible to contradict. In the ten years from 1934 the Federation had emerged from disunity and weakness to win for itself a closed shop agreement and renewed power. Nevertheless, the use made of these advantages was wide open to criticism. It was one thing to win 100% membership of the union but quite another to ensure that this muscle was used in the most effective fashion. There were many miners who were fed up and frustrated with the reticence, as they perceived it, of their leaders in pressing for more dramatic improvements more quickly. The result was an atmosphere charged with the kind of niggling unrest which had manifested itself amongst a great many combine workers during the pre-war days. It did not vapourise in a puff of patriotic fervour; it hung about like firedamp and was as prone to explode as the real thing.

Horner's Address came at the end of a month which saw an unprecedented attack by trade union leaders upon those of their members who indulged in unofficial industrial action. It was as if the Porter Award Strikes had served to dislodge the stopper of a barrel of constitutional invective. Thus, Ernest Bevin, speaking at a luncheon at the Dorchester Hotel

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24 Ibid.



to the Conciliation Board of the civil engineering industry, denounced the recent spate of strikes as being " ... worse than if Hitler had bombed Sheffield and cut off our communications."<sup>25</sup> Ebby Edwards and Walter Citrine followed up by launching a "bitter attack" on those who "struck, illegally, during the vital preparations for the concerted Allied attack upon Nazi-fortified Europe". Those strikes, they argued, " ... have already gravely impeded these imminent operations, and have brought about a curtailment of essential production. Continuance of such a state of affairs cannot fail to produce a major national disaster and imperil the victory of the Allied cause."<sup>26</sup>

They singled out, in particular, the disturbances amongst apprentices on the Clyde and Tyneside and amongst miners in South Wales and Yorkshire. These actions, they said, threatened the entire policy that the trade union movement had pursued since the war began: "It strikes at the relations which have been maintained between the Government, the trade unions and the employers' organisations, through which important trade-union advances have been secured."<sup>27</sup> On behalf of the General Council of the TUC, Citrine and Edwards called upon every worker to realise that " ... industrial participation in, or even tacit support of, unofficial strikes

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25 C.G., 7.4.44.

26 Ibid., 14.4.44.

27 Ibid.

is not only disloyal to the trade unions and to their fellow workers, who as trade unionists, abide faithfully by union rules and accept the guidance of their responsible leaders. It is a blow struck in the back at their comrades in the Armed Forces who are now steeling themselves for a life-and-death struggle on the European Continent."<sup>28</sup>

On the day following this summons, Major Lloyd George, the Minister of Fuel and Power, stated that the Government shared to the full the apprehensions which had been expressed "on all sides" about the lack of discipline within the trade unions which had manifested itself so rudely in the previous few months. "Without discipline on both sides of industry", he warned, "collective bargaining cannot survive ... the younger and less responsible men too frequently exert an undue influence. A special responsibility rests upon the maturer members of the unions to assert their position and to support the executive authority of their unions so that agreements entered into will be properly observed."<sup>29</sup>

This unholy alliance of Government ministers and trade union bureaucrats added authority to the virulent attack being waged upon the miners by the press. As one commentator put it, "Only a few voices were raised to counter the general hysteria whipped up by Fleet Street's self-righteous indignation."<sup>30</sup>

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28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 M. Foot, op.cit., p.445.

Amongst them was Aneurin Bevan who attempted to cut through this synthetic outrage in order that he might expose to the baying "public" the underlying disease which so troubled the industry. It was, he argued, "Churchill's rooted refusal to contemplate the abolition of private property in coal mines" that was the deep cause of the crisis. "And one of its ugliest accompaniments was the undermining of the credit of the miners' own leaders with their followers. Perforce they often came to their followers empty handed. But they had spent so much of their time ... 'exhorting, rebuking and even abusing' the rank-and-file that the miners have come perilously near to a morbid distrust of their leaders!"<sup>31</sup>

Unlike Bevan, however, Will Lawther and Ernest Bevin, amongst others, preferred to scan the hysterical surface - bathed as it was in the garish light of the yellow press - in search of renegade plotters upon whom to lay the blame for the unrest. The result is too familiar to be worth recounting in detail here. A Trotskyist scheme to "paralyse" British industry was supposedly uncovered and new powers were granted the authorities to deal with it.<sup>32</sup> Bevan dismissed the whole thing as constituting nothing more than a childish romp: " ... we never suspected Ernest Bevin of a boyish gusto for the sensational and romantic. It appears we were quite wrong. Behind that stolid and somewhat unprepossessing exterior

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31 Ibid., p.446.

32 The introduction of Regulation 1AA (see below, footnote 35).

is a romantic and elfish spirit."<sup>33</sup> And it was Bevan who reminded the British public, through the pages of Tribune, that Lawther and those other miners' leaders who had sus<sup>b</sup>scribed to the Trotskyist thesis had dared not peddle such ideas firsthand to the miners of South Wales or Yorkshire: to tell such miners that they went on strike at the instigation of Trotskyists, he wrote, would have brought forth only derision: "The men would laugh them off the platform."<sup>34</sup>

He was joined in his vocal condemnation of the Government's behaviour by the SWMF and the Scottish TUC who called upon Labour M.P.s to amend the Order enforcing Regulation 1AA.<sup>35</sup> It is significant that out of all of the country's Federated miners' unions, it was the SWMF which was most articulate in this respect and it also provides some indication of the extreme tensions present within that organisation. It would, after all, have been very easy for Horner, as a leading member of the CPGB, to jump upon the belt-the-Trotskyists bandwagon. That he did not do so was a tribute to his own political acumen and to the democratic nature of the SWMF and its executive.

He argued, in April 1944, that the main concern of the miners should now be to consolidate the gains they had recently made so that they "shall not be taken away at the end of the war"; the guarantee of existing wages under the

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33 M. Foot, op.cit., pp. 446-447.

34 Ibid., p.449.

umbrella of the Porter minima should be made secure. To throw away this protection would "exempt the Government of all post-war responsibility" for the miners' welfare. It was, he said, his considered opinion that the only permanent solution of the coal situation, "this side of Socialism", was the nationalisation of the mining industry.<sup>36</sup> Miners and their families held a "firm and unassailable conviction" that only when the State had taken over the mines would there be planning efficiency and considerate treatment of the miners "which alone (could) guarantee that Britain (would) get the coal it required now and in the future."<sup>37</sup>

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36 SWMF Annual Conference Report, 1944, Presidential Address, p.22. This is a clear indication that Horner did not suffer from the common ailment amongst trade union leaders of publicly confusing nationalisation with the introduction of socialism. It also knocks on the head the argument propounded by certain historical commentators that, somehow, Horner (like most Welsh miners) had lost the ability which he had once possessed (i.e. just before and after World War 1) to place (in the manner of the Miners' Next Step) nationalisation in its true political and economic context. Unlike most trade union leaders, Horner was under no delusion regarding the nature of nationalisation. To him, it was a vehicle whereby the conditions and wages of his members might be improved and whereby the country might obtain its coal with more efficiency and less pain.

37 SWMF Annual Conference Report, 1944, Presidential Address. Like Bevan, Horner recognised the folly of merely hurling patriotic slogans at the miners. (Though, as we have seen, he was not averse to prodding around quite brutally in their collective conscience). Like Bevan, he understood the demand of his South Wales members for leaders who displayed a principled sensitivity in their public actions. Indeed, Horner was rarely guilty of adhering to the amorphous political pragmatism which characterised so many of his trade union contemporaries. His was a political consciousness which, largely as a result of an accident of birth, found its most apt expression in the world of mining trade unionism. This did not mean, however, that he surrendered himself to, and became bludgeoned by, the narrow administrative and bargaining roles which have always been the reserve of important trade union leaders. He did not lapse into what one subsequent miners' leader referred to as the "amorality" of a Will Lawther or Arthur Deakin. He retained a tremendous desire to make real, now sooner than later, the vision of socialism which he shared for so long with others from the coalfield. Repeatedly, he imposed upon industrial controversies further dimensions of promise and drama. The

37 (continued)

promise was that included in his vision of a socialist future and the drama he supplied with his ongoing version of an heroic epic in which, as he described it, the workers strove to attain socialism in the face of mighty odds. And if sometimes the workers worshipped at the feet of false gods or followed wrong paths, then he explained that, too, as being the work of the capitalist and of his agents who would, if they were able, deny the People access to paradise. Such follies as did occur, he explained, were the result of subtle traps, misinformation and wrong consciousness. Mistakes were therefore never final nor were they the cause of eternal damnation. Like Ulysses, the workers might be lured, perhaps for decades, from their true course, but eventually, at least in Horner's version of the epic, they would embrace the socialist cause and build paradise on earth.

Pressing home his point, he asked the delegates to the coalfield's annual conference to take notice of the way in which the owners - though they were conducting such a "widespread campaign against nationalisation", had given public confession of their own bankruptcy by having to go outside the mining industry to find a "super industrialist" to whom they were prepared to pay £12,000 a year to come and help reorganise an industry which no-one in their ranks was apparently trusted to do.<sup>38</sup> Nor, he argued, were the other schemes of the owners any less bankrupt: "We know what centralisation under monopoly capitalism means. We have seen in our own valleys what combines mean. We know they are no solution of the problem, and that is why, if this nation were well advised, it would understand that this demand for nationalisation is not just some capricious demand on the part of miners who are alleged to be "awkward", "difficult to understand" and "never satisfied", but the demand of a section of the community who from first-hand experience know that only when private enterprise and private property in the mining industry has been eliminated can there be scientific planning, introduction of new methods of production, and clearing away of obsolete methods, which can achieve an astonishing increase in coal production and at the same time lessen the danger to human life and limb, and thus completely transform the mining industry of this country and remove from it the stigma and the fear that at present exist."<sup>39</sup>

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38 Ibid., p.23.

39 Ibid.

Here, for the delight and contemplation of his audience, was the vision of a future which might yet come about - a vision in which even the mineworkers' stubborn defence of traditional customs and practices would be left at the wayside like an obsolete tank abandoned in favour of a safer, streamlined model. Such projections were vital components of Horner's winning technique on the public platform. He preached of the impending Heaven of Technological Mining and cursed to damnation the existing slipshod drudgery by which private profits were accumulated. The first step to this Heaven, he informed his audience in 1944, was the defeat of the Nazis. This was the immediate object: the immediate destruction of capitalism's Frankenstein: "The nightmare of Fascism will be eliminated. Mankind shall go about its lawful occasions in peace. From death and destruction we shall turn to life and construction; and through this victory over Fascism we shall all be strongly equipped to proceed to the accomplishment of the historic mission of the working class, the conquest of power, the establishment of Socialism, and the perfecting of the most magnificent era of Socialist construction that mankind has ever yet seen."<sup>40</sup>

Having strengthened, with such stirring rhetoric, his support amongst the assembled delegates, he went on, during the Conference to play his part in registering a collective

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.24.



protest against the introduction of the anti-strike Order 1AA (amending Regulation 1A of the 1939 Defence Regulations) and called on mining members of Parliament to get the Order annulled. The method adopted by the Government in legislating against strikes in this manner was described as "thoroughly undemocratic, showing clear signs of class prejudice and bound to have the opposite effect to the declared intention of the Government."<sup>41</sup>

A Conference resolution was passed stating that occasions would arise when it would be necessary to hold immediate meetings. But the Order (1AA) rendered all persons who attended such meetings liable to prosecution - despite the fact that they were genuinely ventilating grievances arising out of their employment. The Conference was "convinced" that the prosecution of members under this Order was "bound to meet with the strongest spontaneous opposition of the working class."<sup>42</sup>

In a last word to the delegates on April 29th, Horner appealed to them to use all their influence to prevent any cessation of work at the end of the following week ... "if errors should arise in the calculation of pay properly due." The higher rates of pay for pieceworkers and the shilling-a-day increase to several thousands of craftsmen and skilled workers (which the Government had promptly awarded in response to the strikers) were due to come into effect on the next pay day and Horner warned the delegates that it was their duty as SWMF

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<sup>41</sup> C.G., 5.5.44.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

members to "have regard to important issues on which the lives of their countrymen depended. Millions of men would be called upon to leave these shores", he reminded them,"and scores of thousands might never arrive in Europe." Against that they could "not balance whether a shilling was to be paid this week or the next. All grievances which might arise would be dealt with by the executive and officers of the Federation."<sup>43</sup>

The membership responded positively to his arguments and pleas. By the end of May, the Regional Controller (William Jones) commented upon the "Better atmosphere" which he said had pervaded the coalfield since the strike. He reported that in the month past there had been only 2 minor stoppages on the whole field - despite the fact that, during April, approximately 600 workmen had been reported for absenteeism, lateness and other offences under the EWO. More than half the men concerned, he said, were under 30 years of age and they had been warned of the seriousness of the offences. In proceedings taken four convictions had been obtained.<sup>44</sup>

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43 Ibid.

44 C.G., 26.5.44.

At the end of May, 7 colliers from the Cory-Powell Duffryn-owned Wyndham colliery in the Ogmore Valley were fined at Bridgend County Court by Judge Clark Williams, K.C., for ca'canny, when they claimed they were working in abnormal conditions. The owners brought the charges and the men were fined from £5 to £11 each. The judge said that the men had expressed themselves to the officials in a manner which left no doubt in his mind that they were deliberately restricting their output against what they regarded as grievances.

The Normandy landings brought fresh appeals from Horner for "special demonstrations of loyalty" and, once again, the response was a positive one. The miners of the Aberdare Valley, for example, produced a higher tonnage in the first week of the invasion than during any week previously during the year and it was reported that some pits had seen an appreciable reduction in absenteeism.<sup>45</sup>

This kind of response did little to disguise the fact that there continued to exist a great deal of dissatisfaction within the workforce. Much of it took the form of open criticism of the MFGB executive and of the TUC General Council. It manifested itself most clearly in the widespread support which the South Wales constituency Labour Parties bestowed upon Anuerin Bevan when he drew upon himself the outraged condemnation of the TUC and MFGB leadership as a result of his accusing them of willingly compromising the socialist spirit of the Labour Movement. He had alleged that Citrine, Lawther and the rest of the ruling Right wing of the TUC had joined with "quisling" elements of the Parliamentary Labour Party to drain from Parliament the "healthy vigour ... which comes with independence, discussion and criticism."<sup>46</sup> Either this state of affairs was corrected, said Bevan, or the movement would be forced to "submit to the corporate rule of Big Business and collaborationist Labour leaders."

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<sup>45</sup> C.G., 16.6.44.: Three collieries in the valley produced more than their quota: Rhigos, Nos 1 & 4 drifts; Abergorki (P.D.) and Bwllfa (P.D.).

<sup>46</sup> M. Foot, op.cit., p.461.

His criticisms arose as a result of the decision of both the TUC and the Labour Party to approve of Regulation 1AA - a decision which was subsequently backed by the Executive of the MFGB. Indeed, when the Executive debated the subject they also considered representations from the TUC directed to the two main points of Bevan's attack on trade union leaders: his criticism of the consultations between the Ministry of Labour and representatives of the TUC (as members of the Ministry's Joint Consultative Committee) during the framing of the Regulation and his repudiation of the policy of "collaboration" which the unions had adopted on the advice of the TUC. The MFGB Executive passed a resolution deploring "the unprovoked attack on responsible officials of the trade union movement by Mr. A. Bevan in the House of Commons on April 28th - an attack based on unfounded charges and allegations - and desire to point out that we reserve to ourselves the right to negotiate with Government Departments on proposed legislation affecting the members of the Federation."<sup>47</sup>

As Dai Rolf Llewellyn had been during the Boys' Strikes, so Aneurin Bevan was branded, even by many on the Left, as having acted irresponsibly - not merely because of the alleged damage which his statements were causing to the image of patriotic respectability which currently was being constructed for the MFGB by Lawther and his colleagues on the executive. Bevan, however, announced publicly that he considered the miners'

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<sup>47</sup> C.G., 16.6.44.

involvement in such a "construction" tantamount to class collaboration. Indeed, he explained his criticism of the leadership of the Labour Party and of the TUC by arguing that it was because he believed that there were elements within the Party which wished to continue association with the Tories when the war ended that he refused to allow himself to be "manoeuvred out of the Party and thus leave them with a clear field in which to accomplish the ruin of the Labour movement."<sup>48</sup> As his biographer has commented, it was Bevan, rather than the trade union bureaucrats, who had sensed best the leftward shift in the politics of wartime British men and women. The Ebbw Vale Labour Party passed an unanimous resolution congratulating him on his stand against Regulation 1AA and expressing confidence in his conduct as an M.P.<sup>49</sup> Horner and the other Communist executives of the SWMF must have looked with considerable envy upon Bevan's much-publicised "maverick" defence of socialism, for they, too, were the recipients of a great deal of the opprobrium which had attached itself to the right-wing Labour bureaucrats with whom they collaborated in promoting the productivity drives and increased disciplinary measures.

Though never openly, or spectacularly, opposing Bevan's analysis, Horner was stung, nevertheless, to defend the SWMF leadership and its policies. Once again, he asked the workforce

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<sup>48</sup> M. Foot, op.cit., p.461.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.462.

to look back and to appreciate how much things had improved as a result of the efforts of the Federation; and, more astutely, he interpreted, for his audience, the period of industrial peace which had followed the Porter Strikes as being indicative of the "overwhelming support" which existed for the Executive Committee's handling of the whole affair. Speaking at Ystradmynach on July 16th he said that it was clear that there was now a "better understanding of the situation in the mining industry than previously." He thought the miners generally were beginning to appreciate that those who were responsible for the great changes that had taken place in the status and interests of the workmen of the country were doing their best and doing all they could to raise the status of the miners. In the past nine months, he argued, the MFGB had done more to improve the lot of its members than the old Federation had done in 30 years previously. He claimed that they had secured the best cost-of-living agreement obtained by any organisation in the country and for the first time they had established as practice the principle of a national minimum wage.<sup>50</sup>

The late Summer and Autumn of 1944 witnessed a national debate in mining circles concerning the proposed formation of one big union - the NUM - and a coalfield debate in South Wales on the future or non-future of mechanised mining. On both issues Horner led the "progressive" forces - in the case of the NUM

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50 C.G., 21.7.44.

debate, against Nottinghamshire's Spencer; and in the case of mechanization, against the ex-SWMF President and M.P. for Llanelli, Jim Griffiths, who, in a series of suspiciously popularist speeches, stressed the priority, as he saw it, for a "new spirit" in the coal industry which would allow it to regain its "former glory".<sup>51</sup> Horner and Griffiths were united, however, in their steadfast conviction that the industry should be nationalised as soon as was possible and in their opposition to the divisive conservatism displayed by George Spencer who insisted upon guarding the hybrid constitution of his county's union with a possessiveness akin to that of a madly jealous husband. Relatively minor difficulties aside, both Griffiths and Horner epitomized the orthodoxies of their respective party centres. Horner stuck manfully to the C.P.'s line of maintaining maximum production no matter what the "provocation" from the owners or government; Griffiths likewise radiated the image of a responsible representative of Labour dedicated to the furtherance of his Party and of the Movement from whence he came. Both enshrined, at that moment in time, a very different spirit from that of Bevan. For whilst they felt themselves morally obliged to genuflect, however wearily and cynically, towards the altar of "public opinion" and to sacrifice before it assorted victims who might be absenteeists one day, go-slowers the next, Bevan blasphemed in the eyes of the trade union bureaucrats, abused the political temerity of his Party bosses and articulated more convincingly

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51 Ibid., 27.10.44.

than Horner, the grievances and aspirations of the mining rank-and-file. Indeed, by the cessation of fighting in Europe in May 1945, the steadfast resolution with which Communist leaders in the Federation stuck at the task of promoting industrial peace proved trying even for long-standing Party members. One of them - Evan John, Chairman of the Craig Merthyr Lodge and prominent non-participant in the Porter Award strikes - spoke later of the way in which he, and others like him, constantly ran the risk of falling foul of the C.P.'s Regional Executive whenever they involved themselves in unofficial actions. He recalled that, shortly after the end of the European War, he advocated in Lodge meetings that it was "time that we were looking after our own interests now- we've got to have more money for more coal out ... so we went on a go-slow; I was condemned, I was thrown out of the Party then ... in 1945 ... because the war was still on in Japan. It was working to rule we were see ... There was an inquiry in Cardiff and I was suspended from the Party. They said that the war was still on and we shouldn't be greedy and look for something else until the war was over and I didn't agree with it; I said, 'Churchill now is openly coming out against the (Soviets) because the war is over in Europe and as far as I was concerned it's still a bloody Imperialist War: we've got to look after ourselves now' - which we did of course - we made strikes during that time but the Party said "You shouldn't have done it" and out I had to go."<sup>52</sup>

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52 Recording of Evan John, Glais, June 1976.



Evan John's action was completely at variance with the lesson which Horner had preached a month earlier at the SWMF Annual Conference. "Today", he informed the assembled delegates, "we stand on the verge of military victory over Hitler's armies. We have achieved much, but even with that military victory we shall not have finished the job of destroying and burning out Fascism from the world. That job still confronts us; its success will depend on how we tackle the urgent problems that arise after the military defeat of Hitler. And for that final moral and political defeat of Fascism we shall, I believe, also need national unity. "What are the problems likely to be? I have in mind here, first the organisation of the speedy defeat of Japan in the Far East ..."<sup>53</sup>

Less than a week after the signing of the European armistice, however, there occurred the first stay-down strike in a British pit since May 1941. It took place at Nine Mile Point colliery in Monmouthshire, scene of a previous and more celebrated stay-down against Company Unionism in 1935. On Sunday, 13th May 1945, nineteen men refused to surface from the pit in protest against the stoppage of certain allowances on the grounds of alleged absenteeism and insufficient work. Despite a plea for work to recommence, made by the Communist vice-president of the SWMF, Alf Davies, 1,100 Nine Mile Point colliers came out in sympathy with the strikers and the action was not brought to a conclusion for five days.

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53 SWMF Annual Conference Report, 1945, "Presidential Address", p.14.

54 C.G., 18.5.45. and 25.5.45.

The significance of the fact that the *first* stay-down occurred at Nine Mile Point was not lost upon the leadership of the SWMF (or South Wales Area of the National Union of Mineworkers: SWNUM, as it had now become). The stay-down of 1935 had triggered off a long series of similar actions right across the coalfield and it needed little imagination to envisage a similar resurgence of spontaneous strikes in 1945 - especially after the obvious and immediate success of the Porter Award stoppages of the previous year. In many ways, the industrial and political atmosphere was a good deal more propitious for strike action in 1945 than it had been ten years earlier; the Federation was now wholly solvent, operating a closed shop and exuding self-confidence. Its members were better paid and infinitely more secure. They were also restless, acutely aware of their strategic position within the nation's industrial structure and determined to prevent any return to the bad old pre-war years. They demanded nationalisation of the mines and the implementation of the so-called Miners' Charter. To achieve these ends, they had voted overwhelmingly for the formation of one big union and they had continued, for the most part, to act in the "sober and responsible" manner which their elected union leaders demanded of them - even after the curtailment of the Nazi military threat. Now they were being plied with yet another crisis - one which was aimed to appeal to their "internationalist" sentiments; Europe must be reconstructed, democracy revived and the

European and British economies dragged back to peace-time efficiency. For this great undertaking, nothing, they were told, was more vital than a guaranteed and plentiful supply of coal. Their leaders pitched their arguments for continued collaboration with the Government in much the same tones as they had done right through the war. Lawther, for example, talked of England being reduced to "the distressed area of the world" if coal production and efficiency was not improved.<sup>55</sup> But he and his colleagues spiced their familiar message with ever more frequent public demands for nationalisation - an astute tactic, in as much as the campaign to end private ownership effectively captured the imagination and energy of the whole workforce and channelled it into a deep reservoir - the sluice-gates of which were seen to be controlled by the elected leadership of the NUM.

That leadership went into the general election of 1945 with no serious strikes or go-slows on its hands. Trouble, when it appeared, almost inevitably arose in the old centres of unofficial disruption: Scotland, South Yorkshire and South Wales, but even these areas were remarkably quiet and remained so, with the exception of a number of South Wales anthracite pits, until the early months of 1946.

The fissures, between leadership and unofficial militants, which had opened up after 1942 healed themselves and appeared to the public as nothing more than scars.

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55 MFGB Annual Conference Report, 1945, "Presidential Address".

This process of healing contained within it, however, the recipe for future divisions. The balm was the promise of nationalisation, but how it was to be applied and how it was to affect the working lives of the patients was, in 1945, largely unknown. Confident predictions were made that, like some miracle drug, nationalisation would cure an industry which appeared, increasingly rapidly, to be dying on its feet.

In South Wales, the debate, concerning the proper nature of nationalisation, which had raged strongly during the first two decades of the century, had lapsed markedly since the defeat of 1926. Horner who, by his own account, had been a contributor to the drafting of the "Miners' Next Step" in 1912, had evidently modified his ideas upon the subject very considerably. The syndicalism which had characterised that remarkable document had, by 1945-47, become submerged beneath a layer of unimaginative Morrisonian compromise which envisaged any future nationalised industry as resembling the London Passenger Transport Board.<sup>56</sup> The spirit of "mines for the miners", however, was still very much present in the coalfield and the experiences which the miners had undergone during wartime had done little to subdue it. On the contrary, the ineptitude and inefficiency which had characterised much of wartime management's activities provided further proof to any amongst the workforce who may have needed it that only with their total co-operation and democratic participation

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56 Ken Coates, ed., "Democracy in the Mines", Nottingham 1974, p.127.

could the industry be revived and advanced. The Porter Award strikes had reminded them, more forcefully than at any time since the early days of the General Strike, how enormous was their industrial power. Indeed, as Horner and Lawther never tired of informing them, it was no exaggeration to say that the miners held in their hands the key to Britain's industrial future.

In such a situation, the obvious question should have been, "What form should nationalisation take?" Should it be the great experiment in industrial democracy which so many inside and outside of the union wanted it to be, or should it be an application of Morrisonian bureaucratic controls? In any situation other than in Britain in the second half of 1945 and through 1946 the question would have been not only obvious but critical. That it was not so was due almost entirely to the election of a Labour Government (which made nationalisation almost a certainty) and to the nature of the relationships which existed, on the one hand, between the mineworkers' elected leaders and their Labour counterparts, and on the other hand, between the new government and the miners themselves.

Both relationships were at once simple and complex: simple in as much as there was an enormous display of gut support for the Labour Party in virtually all of the mining constituencies - a support which, though it waned in its intensity, hardly diminished in its loyalty until the fall of the Party from power in 1951; complex in as much as it

involved the miners and their leaders (both Communists and otherwise) in an enormous number of compromises - many of which were undertaken only after a great deal of infighting, public recrimination and political soul-searching. Continued political euphoria amongst certain sections of the workforce after the election of the Labour Government mixed badly with the rapid political disillusionment which gripped others. Stay-downs such as that witnessed at Nine Mile Point became commonplace before the new Government fell, but at no time was there a strike even remotely as large as that of March 1944. (Though the Grimethorpe dispute in Yorkshire was to cause almost as much media condemnation). Indeed, it was not until 1972 that the scale of the Porter Strikes was emulated - despite the fact that the membership of the NUM found its loyalty to its elected leaders sorely tested on <sup>n</sup>many occasions during the intervening years.

## 2. The Election of a Labour Government

"This island is almost made of coal and surrounded by fish. Only an organising genius could produce a shortage of coal and fish in Great Britain at the same time."

Aneurin Bevan at the Labour Party Conference, 1945<sup>57</sup>

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57 M. Foot, op.cit., p.504.

"But we - and may I say this as one who, in the course of the last five and a half years, has had very many differences with the leaders of our own Party - we, at this time, are completely united on this matter. There are no vast differences between us now, and any memories of past differences we shall erase from our minds and from our hearts, because we have before us not only the greatest opportunity this nation has ever provided for a Party, but the greatest responsibility that any nation has ever undertaken."<sup>58</sup>

Horner, in his autobiography, paints a very dramatic picture of his and his Party's role in the 1945 election. He alleges that he played a central part in convincing King Street of the folly of standing Communist candidates against Labour opponents in constituencies other than those which were unshakeably Labour. He himself, he says, was convinced of the correctness of this line during a doubtfully informal soiree with Lord Beaverbrook and several "top leaders" of the Conservative Party just prior to the election: "It was clear to me", he wrote, "that the Conservatives hoped to see the working-class vote split. They wanted the Communists to fight the Labour Party. The next morning I was waiting on the doorstep of King Street headquarters of the Communist Party, and I pressed at once for the withdrawal of the Communist candidates. When the election came there were one or two token fights in safe Labour seats ... But that was all.

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58 Ibid., pp.504-506.

"Unlike a lot of people, even in the Labour Movement, I was not surprised at the election victory of 1945. I knew that the British people, and particularly the working people, were determined that they must have a new deal, after what they had suffered between the two wars."<sup>59</sup>

This was, indeed, a rapid transformation on Horner's part, for he had, to all ~~interests~~<sup>ends</sup> and purposes, argued more or less up to the eve of the election, for the return of a National Government with a Labour majority. At the SWMF Annual Conference in April 1945, for example, he informed the delegates that they should do their utmost "to see that at the next Election a majority of Labour and Progressive" (i.e. those who would stand, as he put it, "fully for the principles laid down at Crimea" - the Yalta Conference) M.P.s were returned so that a "truly National" government could be formed, "headed by the Labour Movement, which will throw the whole of British power and influence on the side of progress. In striving to meet the needs and desires of our own people in the mines, we will also do our part in the common cause. There must be no reflection of 1924 and 1929, when the Labour Government were prisoners, incapable of decisive action."<sup>60</sup>

Horner was here merely repeating the Communist Party's line on the elections.<sup>61</sup> In March 1945, Harry Pollitt had declared that there should be "a 'new National Government' which should include 'representatives of all parties supporting the decisions of the Crimea Conference'."<sup>62</sup>

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59 A. Horner, Incorrigible Rebel, pp.174-175.

60 SWMF Annual Conference Report, 1945, Presidential Address, p.15.

61 Henry Pelling, The British Communist Party, London 1958, p.130.

62 Ibid., pp.130-131.



As ~~the~~ Pelling has recorded, the Communist Party Executive, "believing that Winston Churchill, with all the prestige of an architect of victory, would be invincible at the polls ... favoured the maintenance of the coalition after the end of the war ... It was assumed that this coalition would be reformed after the General Election, in which, of course, the Communist Party would do sufficiently well to become an important element."<sup>63</sup>

This doubt regarding Labour's ability to obtain an absolute majority, or even a simple majority, over the Tories was not exclusive to members of the Communist Executive; it was widespread amongst leading members of the Labour Party itself<sup>64</sup> - despite the fact that pre-election confidence amongst the Party's rank-and-file and amongst the great majority of its Back-Bench M.P.s was rampant.<sup>65</sup>

It was a doubt of the kind which continued to plague both politicians and trade union leaders throughout the terms of office of the post-war Attlee governments. It sprang from a basic lack of belief in the ability of Labour to govern the country successfully in the face of opposition from the Tory-controlled media, the conservatism of the City and what was generally regarded as an almost in-bred "moderation" dominating the political habits of the British voting public. It was a doubt which found its most congenial lodgings inside the Parliamentary Labour Party and amongst the leadership of the TUC.

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63 Ibid., p.131.

64 F. Williams, A Prime Minister Remembers, London 1961., and M. Foot, op.cit., p.503.

65 M. Foot, op.cit., pp.503-504.

The result was that both these bodies tended, after 1945, to cling together, as if to comfort one another, with a conspiratorial intensity which radiated hostility towards anyone whom they considered a potential threat to their conjugality. Lawther, for example, went to great pains immediately prior to the election to ensure the public that his union and the Labour Party were absolutely united on all important questions relating to the coal industry. In June 1945, he informed the NUM Annual Conference that in a recent broadcast, Ernest Brown (the National Government's former Minister of Labour) had asked rhetorically: "Where is the Lawther plan?" (for nationalisation) Lawther replied from the Conference platform that he was forced to confess that there was no "Lawther plan". There was, he told them, the plan of the National Union of Mineworkers and that even this plan was open to modification in the councils of the TUC and Labour Party; indeed, he was at pains to point out that a Labour sub-committee had been set up to research into details. There was, he said, "no sort of divergence or any difference between the Labour Party, the TUC and the Mineworkers on the principle". They did not want to issue the plan in the name of the miners, he said, "because attempts would be made to say that (they) were dictating." It would be issued as a joint document of a united movement.<sup>66</sup>

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66 C.G., 29.6.45.

The fortnight prior to the annual conference had seen the publication of Harold Wilson's "New Deal for Coal."<sup>67</sup>

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67 Wilson, in his book, proposed that means be found to buy off the inveterate hostility of the workmen and their leaders (which he attributed to memories of past hardships) by submitting to the mass opinion of the miners which was, of course, in favour of nationalisation. This would involve, according to Wilson, a transfer of the ownership of all coalmining undertakings to a National Coal Board - a non-profit making public corporation of 11 persons nominated by the Minister. It would also mean the construction of a national Joint Coal Council consisting of representatives of those employed in the industry, with the addition possibly of persons appointed by the Minister to represent the consumers. There would be similar district organisations and wages would continue to be subject to the machinery created after the third Green report. In addition, the workmen were to receive nearly all that would be left over from a revenue derived from a "general price policy" after interest on capital borrowed from the Treasury had been deducted, the only exception being the reserves set aside for new development. Wilson contemplated that the mines might pass under public ownership for something considerably under £200 million and proposed that the owners be paid out in cash by a State loan with the Mining Association to decide who received what compensation. Technical operations would be undertaken by Regional Operating Boards, under the control of the Board. The workmen's loss of bargaining power, where not propitiated by representation on the boards and councils, would be met by the grant of a "Charter" under the prerogative of the Minister.

H. Wilson, New Deal for Coal, London, 1945.

It contained little to warm the hearts of those who were advocating a radical extension of industrial democracy. There were few around in 1945-46 who had specific proposals for such an extension anyway. There existed, rather, a general desire to see the industry change hands first and to sort out administrative and consultative details later. Thus, the SWMF Annual Conference Agenda contained only one resolution demanding an immediate extension of democracy and that urged the Executive Committee to "press for full autonomy and executive authority for Pit Production Committees to implement decisions of the Committee."<sup>68</sup> Much more typical was the Report of the miners' M.P.s drawn up for the Conference by Ness Edwards: "It is pretty certain", he wrote, "that the (General) Election will be held before the year is out.

"This will provide the greatest opportunity that the Movement has ever had to gain power and transform our social economy to the service of the people.

"Millions of our boys and girls will be returning from the Services. The vast majority of them will vote for the first time. The older people will have passed this way before. The lessons of the inter-war years will, we hope, not be repeated. A Tory majority resulted in years of bitter poverty for the forgotten people in the forgotten valleys of South Wales. The unemployment which the coalowners caused was treated as a crime by the Coalowners' Tory friends.

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68 SWMF Annual Conference Agenda, 1945, Resolution 10, Clause 1, submitted by Hendreladis Lodge.

"South Wales, and particularly the miners of South Wales, has always been loyal to its principles and its interests. We go forward to a General Election with courage and faith, knowing that only our Movement holds out the secure hope of justice, security and peace for our people."<sup>69</sup>

Not all was sweet co-operation and altruistic determination however. The same conference agenda reflected continuing divisions on the field - albeit divisions which were subdued for the "common good". A joint resolution from the Cwmcarn and Mountain lodges urging that "every effort be made to get a 40 hour week instead of 45", for example, was smartly amended by the militant Clydach Merthyr lodge (Secretary, Evan John, lately suspended from the Communist Party) with the words "Delete '40' and insert '37½'. Add: 'and a five-day week.'"<sup>70</sup>

The first year of Labour Government brought with it the drafting of a new Miners Charter,<sup>71</sup> the firm promise of nationalisation, repeated counter-attacks of rather feeble quality from the Coalowners who appeared to be capable of doing little other than growling their self-pity as loudly as they were publicly able. It brought Horner the post of National Coal Production Officer, on the nomination of his union and in response to a request from the new Minister of Fuel and Power, Emm<sup>anel</sup> Shinwell. For this job he was given an

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69 SWMF Annual Conference Report, 1945, p.51.

70 SWMF Annual Conference Agenda, 1945, Resolution 15, "Hours".

71 A. Horner, Incorrigible Rebel, pp.176-178.

office at the Ministry of Mines on Millbank in London as well as his office at the NUM. He recalled later that he was "in daily consultation with Shinwell."<sup>72</sup>

In this capacity, he urged the Executive Committee of the SWNUM to launch repeated campaigns for increased output. One such venture was launched in August 1945, when it was proposed to revive the wartime pit production committees and generally to overhaul the disputes machinery at the same time as overhauling pit equipment. Horner promised Shinwell 8 million tons extra in 1945-46 by way of thanks for the latter's promise that he would curtail the practice of Ministerial investigation and prosecution of absenteeism. It was about this time that Horner began appealing to young miners to become "Stakhanovites", informing them that the country could only "rehabilitate" its economic life by "hard work". An intensive propaganda campaign was launched in every coalfield during the late Summer of 1945. Under Horner's direction the NUM appointed "production officers" for each area. In Lancashire, Yorkshire, South Wales, Scotland, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, these officers were full-time officials paid by the national union for the duration of the six-month campaign.

Lawther announced that the production officers would "endeavour to create a new atmosphere in the pit production committees and to secure the appointment of committees" where they did not already exist.<sup>73</sup> Reports from the pit committees were to be sent regularly to the area production

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> C.G., 7.9.45.

officers and target figures were to be issued for each area. These in turn, would be related to every pit and the men were to be informed week by week, or day by day if necessary, of what was expected of them and of how near they were to the target. The practice, introduced during wartime, of flying a production flag at the pit head when the target was reached was continued in the hope that this would spur the men on to an extra effort in the knowledge that their endeavours would be recognised by the general public. The union asked that the fullest facilities be given to its production officers and to the pit committees. Lawther, on behalf of his Executive, informed Shinwell that he considered that these officers should have a "free hand" in dealing with all questions affecting production.<sup>74</sup> Shinwell promised that he and his officials in the regions would give all the help they could and he particularly assured Lawther that the minutes of the pit production committee meetings would be available to the officers.<sup>75</sup> In turn, he assured the National Association of Colliery Managers that these promises to the NUM in no way undermined their managerial authority and he outlined his proposals for making their profession as attractive as was possible to potential entrants, for he was, he said, "... counting on the colliery managers to help in every possible way in the difficult interim period and in getting the new

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74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

system into running order." He was also "counting upon the good will of the colliery managers to increase the amount of co-operation between management and men" because, as he expressed it, a better atmosphere was essential to the industry and therefore to the nation."<sup>76</sup>

These pleas for industrial harmony were backed up by suitable political pronouncements from both Labour and Communist officers of the NUM. Horner, who had already informed the South Wales membership that they should regard it as a matter of "working class honour to give complete support in word and deed to the new Government"<sup>77</sup> extended his message to British miners in general. It was the miners, he said, "probably more than any other section of the community" who had voted for the return of a Labour Government, therefore they had "a special responsibility to enable it to solve its economic problems". for, "without sufficient coal Labour's programme could not be carried out."<sup>78</sup>

With the verbal groundwork completed, the productivity campaign was begun. On September 19th 1945, the first meeting of the South Wales Production Committee (SWPC) took place and proposals were heard from Lodge members. The tone of the campaign was set by Will Arthur, the South Wales production officer, who advocated that any person found "retarding" output would be

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76 Ibid., Will Arthur was appointed production officer for the South Wales coalfield which was set a target of one million tons extra in 1946/47.

77 See, above, Chapter One, p. 10

78 C.G., 28.9.45.



"dealt with on the spot instead of reporting him to two or three authorities."<sup>79</sup> All grievances were to be immediately notified to the Production Committee and Lodges were asked to submit suggestions to increase output. Pit personnel were to be scrutinized so that all young men working in other occupations could be transferred to the coal face. Overall pit discipline was to be tightened. To achieve this effect, the NUM Executive announced that if any miner refused in any district to "accept his obligations" and therefore brought upon himself legal action (perhaps for absenteeism), he would not receive the protection or support of his union.<sup>80</sup>

The union issued in the coalfields half a million leaflets, "Clear the Way for Nationalisation", in which it was repeated that coal would be the test for the success or failure of the Labour Government. "Everything will be at stake during the next six months, while the plans for the introduction of nationalisation are being steered through Parliament."

By late October, 1945, a slight improvement in output per manshift was noted by Emm Shinwell when he addressed a delegate Conference of the SWNUM in Cardiff. This, he said, indicated that the men were making a "greater effort" but added that his principal task was to "break down the prejudices in the mining industry ... For too long management

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79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

and men had viewed each other with the utmost hostility. Now there were no longer two sides to the mining industry, but management and men who must work together as a team. Unless we can secure that team-spirit no additional man-power or improved machinery would be of the least avail."<sup>81</sup> "All things considered," he told them, the miners were "doing very well" and he had no desire to complain, but the coal position was so grave that he was "bound to ask for a greater effort. Similar speeches proliferated during the following months from Horner, Lawther, Will Arthur and the Regional Controller of Production, Howell Owen.

They did not, however, succeed in inspiring the great numbers of ex-miners who had left the pits during the early war years to return, and lack of manpower continued to keep down production. Commenting upon this, Horner described the various Governmental attempts to come to terms with shortage as being largely and obviously ineffective. He was especially scathing concerning the Bevin Boys scheme, describing it as a failure: "Experience with these Bevin Boys," he said, "has shown that the mines cannot be worked with forced labour." Of the 45,000 boys who were directed to the mines, nearly half of them had thrown up their jobs, he told a Newport audience. They were being sought in every part of the country to see if they could be persuaded to return to the pits. New recruits, he alleged, were not coming into the industry: of the last 20,000 ex-miners

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 26.10.45.

now in the Forces, nearly 16,000 had been invited to "opt" for immediate release to return to the mines under the so-called Class B scheme. Only 200 had accepted. The result was an appalling manpower shortage.<sup>82</sup>

Nevertheless, overall production seemed to be responding to the union's campaign. During early November, the Regional Controller reported that the output of coal had shown a steady increase and of the 200 collieries in the coalfield employing 30 or more men, 61 had either reached or exceeded their allocation during the week ended October 13th.<sup>83</sup>

The new "hard-line" on discipline was not imposed unchallenged, however, and strikes continued to niggle at the elbows of Horner and his colleagues. Most occurred in the Anthracite Area, where, as we have seen, pit customs and practices (or "restrictive measures" as the union executives and management had come to call them) were more reluctantly forfeited than in most other areas of the field. The most serious dispute during the campaign occurred at Blaenant colliery in the Dulais Valley where the workforce struck for almost 2 weeks following disciplinary action against a workman. They resumed work only after the individual concerned had been reinstated pending an investigation.

Perturbed, generally, about the state of the anthracite field, Shinwell ordered a former South Wales Regional Controller to make a detailed investigation into working and negotiating

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82 Ibid.

83 Ibid., 2.11.45.

arrangements at each pit in the area. He might well have instructed his official to investigate much wider afield, for, in the same week as the announcement of the anthracite inquiry, it was revealed that, in the first full official week under the Shinwell-8 million-tons-more coal plan, 450,491 tons had been produced from the Associated collieries of South Wales\* compared with 447,276 tons the previous week, representing 94.81% of the target allocation of 475,150 tons. Of the 192 associated pits, 54 equalled or exceeded their allocations with a combined surplus of 8,383 tons, but 138 failed to reach their target by 33,042 tons, thus leaving a net aggregate shortage for all the pits of 24,659 tons.<sup>84</sup>

The figures emphasised how much of a mixed bag South Wales coalmining was. A great many pits were, quite obviously, incapable of achieving any sort of sustained increase in output. They were desperately short of the right type of manpower, worked by backward and inefficient methods and were generally in pretty poor shape; indeed, one mining M.P. described them as a heap of "old junk".<sup>85</sup> This fact was recognised and freely admitted, even by those who were engaged in exhorting the unfortunate inhabitants of these pits to work harder. Horner, for instance, warned the

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 30.11.45.

<sup>85</sup> D.J. Williams, describing the Neath area collieries inherited from the Amalgamated Anthracite combine, C.G., 25.10.46.

\* Who produced, between them, 94% of the coalfield's total production.

Congress of the Communist Party in November that, despite the critical shortage of coal, it could not be produced in adequate tonnages unless they could get more manpower and better organised pits. A resolution was passed at the Congress urging that the appeal for more coal would "meet with readier response" if the Government would speed up supplies of belting, machinery, and spare parts: give an immediate pledge to the miners on the five-day week and two week's holiday with pay and retiring pensions; and take immediate steps to extend medical services and provide more training facilities for new entrants to the mines.<sup>86</sup>

The resolution also warned the Government that its reluctance to provide adequate rates of compensation in its new Bill<sup>87</sup> was causing widespread discontent and if this was not remedied forthwith it could seriously affect the campaign for increased production.

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86 C.G., 30.11.45.

87 Lawther had complained, in mid-November about the "niggardly" award of 45/- a week as an individual disablement pension under the Government's National Insurance (Industrial Injuries) Bill. Speaking on the subject at Treorchy on November 18th, Horner told his audience that miners' leaders were "placed in a very difficult position" in their output campaign. The union would not accept 45/- a week as sufficient compensation for a disabled miner, he said. It had always been contended that the only fair compensation was pre-accident earnings. Extra compensation would be paid under the new rates when there were dependents, but the rates suggested were considerably less than wages. Workers, he concluded, would not be attracted into an industry where they were "so liable to death, injury or disease" when all they were entitled to in terms of compensation was this inadequate measure.

C.G., 23.11.45.

By early December, a marked degree of disenchantment with the productivity campaign expressed itself in a rash of industrial actions, the most serious of which occurred in the East, Steer and Maerdy pits at Gwaun-cae-gurwen where 1,600 miners struck work over a long-standing dispute concerning who, in certain parts of the Steer pit, should carry explosives. At another Gwaun-cae-gurwen pit, Cwmgorse, a strike was narrowly averted when the Lodge accepted management's offer of 1/10 per ton, for cut and conveyed coal, on the newly installed conveyors. There had previously been deadlock over the matter and a marked reluctance amongst the workforce to continue the delay by pushing the dispute through the prescribed negotiatory channels.<sup>88</sup> Shinwell acknowledged the poor results which were being returned despite the campaign and blamed them on the manpower shortage. The fall in manpower, he alleged in a statement issued after a day-long meeting with the NUM on December 18th, had drastically changed the "disposition" of those employed in the industry. The ratio of face-workers had fallen in South Wales, he said, from 44.2% in 1935 to 36.5% in the first six months of 1945, and this tendency, in varying degree, was present in all coalfields. The result was output reductions per manshift far in excess of those represented by the actual fall in overall personnel. Absenteeism, he argued, was largely unavoidable: "Only a minority were absent from work without just cause"; nevertheless,

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88 C.G., 7.12.45. and 28.12.45.

out of a maximum of 6.01 shifts which it was possible to work in 1945, the actual figure was 5.53 shifts a week - a figure which nonetheless compared very favourably with the 5.15 shifts worked per week during 1939.<sup>89</sup>

The statistics referred to by Shinwell showed that existing manpower was working harder in 1945 than during the same season of 1944. In November 1945, output per manshift at faces throughout the country was 0.05 of a ton higher than it was in November 1944. Similarly, output per manshift overall was 0.01 of a ton higher. This, said Shinwell, was an "amazing result" if account was taken of three factors - the age of the men, of whom 150,000 were more than 50, food supplies, and the general expectation of an easing of the strain with the war at an end. The explanation of this phenomenon, he said, was to be found in the "class conscious solidarity of the miners with the Government of their choice and in their determination to implement the promises made on their behalf and with their consent by the NUM." But given all the goodwill in the world, he added, the miners, "even with a readiness to tax physical energy to breaking point", would find it impossible through the winter to produce the coal called for by the Minister if manpower continued to fall at its existing rate. The only remedy, he said, was speedy nationalisation and, as a stop gap, an "improvement in working and wage conditions so attractive as to cause the new inflow of recruits into the mines which was so urgently required."<sup>90</sup>

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89 Ibid., 28.12.45.

90 Ibid.

The problem confronting both Shinwell and the NUM leaders was that of attempting to convince the miners that these interim advances could, and would, be achieved without a reversion to wholesale strike action or the implementation of go-slows. The New Year did not auger well in this respect. The first week of 1946 brought with it two damaging strikes, both of which occurred in areas which had been relatively quiescent during the war years and both of which were provoked by grievances eminently suited for settlement through the newly prescribed channels.<sup>91</sup> To make matters worse, the January production figures were generally poorer than expected in South Wales, those for the week ending January 26th being 50,000 tons below the Shinwell target. Miners' headquarters in Cardiff attributed the decline to "seasonal sickness amongst the miners", whose resistance had been lowered by "6 years of small rations."<sup>92</sup>

In many ways, the publication of the January returns marked a turning point in relations between the Ministry of Fuel and Power, the leadership of the NUM and a number of the union's more militant members. A noticeable polarisation and general hardening of attitudes occurred. From this point onwards, Shinwell and the NUM leaders appeared prepared to apply more venom than previously in their attacks on

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91 1,600 Tower colliery workers struck over a proposed change in the type of lamp issued to them and 1,800 Blaenavon workers struck over an alleged delay in the delivery of concessionary coal.

92 C.G., 8.2.46.



absenteeists and unofficial strikers. Shinwell's speeches, though they continued to reflect the politician's chameleon ability to change their hue to suit different audiences, began to approximate those of the more "progressive" of the coalowners. Speaking in Barnsley in February, for example, he leapt firmly onto the "declining discipline" bandwagon so beloved by the owners. He had to admit, he said, that there was "not the same discipline in the pits as in the past", though he was careful to emphasise that he thought this was caused by a harmful minority of men. "Restoration of discipline", he said, was something very much under consideration as was the question of introducing the previously-promised five-day working week; it would only be introduced, he said, if and when they got "better records of output."<sup>93</sup> A change was also very noticeable in his public attitude towards absenteeists. No word now of what he had termed just over a month earlier the "largely unavoidable" nature of the great majority of absence cases, merely a straight reminder that absenteeism was "causing dislocation" and that it was essential that there should be "team work in the pit, particularly at the coal face." (where the highest percentage of absenteeism was to be found) And there was no truth, he said, in the men's allegations that management were "not very much interested in producing more coal; that they (were) apathetic." He informed his audience

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93 Ibid., 15.2.46.

that he had had consultations with the Colliery Managers' Association and that they had proved themselves very willing to co-operate.<sup>94</sup> Horner, speaking at Cardiff in the same week, was in similar mood. He alleged that the effect of the union's campaign to step up production had been to get more out of the men who were "already doing enough", but that it had failed to "put a stop to the deterioration of a selfish anti-social minority." Between December 1944 and December 1945, he said, there had been a gain in output of 156tons per face worker per shift, but "because of absenteeism and a reduction in effective manpower" that gain had been lost. He reiterated his claim that half the Bevin Boys had disappeared and expressed the opinion that the existing system was "an inducement to the higher-paid piece workers to lose a complete week or more in the knowledge that they (would) receive a refund of income tax to make up for their lost earnings."<sup>95</sup>

It is neither difficult to understand, nor is it surprising, why such changes in attitude should have occurred. The Labour Government and the NUM, in promising the nation salvation from its coal problem, had bitten off mouthfuls which threatened to choke them.

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94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

The mines were not yet nationalised; large profits were still falling into the laps of the coalowners<sup>96</sup>; barriers of various sorts remained firmly entrenched against rapid mechanization and reorganisation, and, from its earliest days, the Labour Government was faced with a continuous post-war economic crisis and an increasingly obvious dependence upon American capital - the supply of which was far from facilitated by the Party's "Socialist" proposals for the extension of public ownership. Both the union and the Government had taken upon themselves tasks which previously had overwhelmed private finance. It was hardly surprising, therefore, to discover that they were not prepared to dismiss the various schemes devised by the coalowners to combat the enormous strains without

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96 Editions of the Colliery Guardian reported the following declared company profits during the summer and winter of 1945-46:

Powell Duffryn net profit for previous financial year	£688,643
*William Cory " " " " " "	£718,635
Ocean Coal " " " " " "	£421,358
Bolsover Collieries " " " " " "	£497,496
Airedale " " " " " "	£233,303
Yorkshire Amalgamated " " " " " "	£177,152
Doncaster " " " " " "	£296,141
Butterfly Collieries trading " " " " " "	£352,772
John Lysaght " " " " " "	£514,511
Partridge Jones & J.P. " " " " " "	£210,551
Tredegar Iron & Coal " " " " " "	£142,543

\* Includes substantial oil interests.

first testing them in the field. To do otherwise might have meant throwing out the baby with the bath water. Thus the charge of absenteeism was dragged time and again out of the bogeyman's cupboard for use upon public platforms. Similarly, Shinwell's attempt to allay part of the blame for low production onto a lack of "pit-discipline".

Occasionally, however, even these disciples of increased productivity reverted to their "old" public images. It is hard, now, to credit Shinwell and Horner with the accusation (for that is what it amounts to) that they believed 100 per cent of what they preached, for there were instances when something other than the spirit of the quasi managerial production officer would show through. Shinwell, for instance, forgot his Ministerial position for one hilarious moment during a council election campaign in County Durham in March 1946, when he informed his audience of mining families that in his opinion the average colliery manager knew as much about social affairs "as a pig does about pianos". The outraged Colliery Guardian editor referred to the speech as an "inexcusable indiscretion" and commented that Shinwell should, as a Minister of the Crown "... retain sufficient detachment to make him incapable of an observation as remarkable for its stupidity as for its bad manners."<sup>97</sup>

Similarly, Horner found it impossible upon times (and even during these particular times, when the Communist Party

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97 C.G., 8.3.46.

was still amorous in its relationship with the Labour Government) to reconcile completely his revolutionary politics with his position as the Government's appointed trouble-shooter. As early as March 1946, he failed to contain his distaste for what he rightly translated as a swift slide to the Right in the Government's foreign policy, and particularly, of course, in their attitude to the Soviet Union. He declared that there would "never be an all-out effort in production as long as workers had the suspicion that our foreign policy was causing a rift in Anglo-Soviet friendship."<sup>98</sup>

More astutely this time, the Colliery Guardian observed that "It looks as if Mr. Horner had not completely shed the Communistic slough which at one time (i.e. 1939-1941) brought him into conflict with a large majority of mineworkers."<sup>99</sup> Horner's assertion was soon tested, in as much as a ballot was held by the NUM Executive to ascertain just how strong was the Communist lobby inside the union. The membership was asked to vote as to whether or not they wished the Labour Party to accede to the request of the Communist Party that it be allowed to affiliate with Labour. The results were predictable,<sup>100</sup> with the majority of votes in favour of

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98 Ibid.

99 Ibid.

<u>100 Votes Cast (a selection)</u>	<u>For Affiliation</u>	<u>Against Affiliation</u>
South Wales	44,450	55,750*
Lancashire	170 delegates	582 delegates
Nottinghamshire	150 delegates	547 delegates
Northumberland	104 delegates	277 delegates

\* South Wales majority against : 11,300.

affiliation being cast in the Communist Party stronghold<sup>s</sup> of South Wales and Scotland, and the great mass of votes against being cast in Lancashire, Nottinghamshire and the North East. The sizeable vote in favour of affiliation, however, gave Horner's pro-Soviet assertions some credence in as much as he was able to argue that there existed a large number of individuals who were sensitive regarding the way in which the Labour Government treated its Left-wing allies.

The poll was, however, mainly an academic exercise. The Labour Party was not about to invite the Communists to affiliate - no matter which way the miners voted - and the coal industry's problems continued to proliferate and to demand ever greater conciliatory efforts from the NUM leadership. In April, for example, a 48 hour stay-down by 11 miners paralysed production at the much-troubled Tareni pit in the Swansea Valley. It fell upon the shoulders of the SNUM's Communist Vice-President, Alf Davies, to persuade the men to end their action and to resume production. In May, anger was expressed at a Swansea meeting of the SNUM over the Government's delay in conceding the principle of a five-day week and a fortnight's continuous holiday (with pay) in addition to six statutory holidays.<sup>101</sup>

This sense of dissatisfaction was noted by the Chairman of the Amalgamated Anthracite Company, F.A. Szarvasy, who commented, in June at the Annual Shareholder's meeting, that, "So far ~~as~~ the

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<sup>NUM</sup>  
101 SNUM Conference Minutes and Reports, May 1946.

new spirit which was to herald nationalisation had in the words of the Minister himself, failed to materialise". His answer to this "problem" was well-nigh identical to that of Shinwell: "What the mining industry requires", he said, was, "first, the re-establishment of discipline, and next, a simple wage structure making earnings closely related to effort."<sup>102</sup> Indeed, much the same solution was advocated by the NUM Executive, and during June they accepted a proposal from the Ministry of Fuel, in connection with the removal of the Essential Work Order, that enforcement of discipline should revert from the miners' Lodges to pit management. Since Shinwell had taken office, the Lodges had undertaken the duty of disciplining their own members, but it was generally agreed at the Bournemouth NUM Conference that, though for a time the innovation had produced good results, it had lately not been effective and had caused friction among the men.<sup>103</sup>

In the same month, yet another campaign was launched by the Government, in consultation with the miners' leaders. This one was aimed at purging the collieries of "slackers" - a breed alleged to consist mainly of "war-time miners who entered the pits as an alternative to military service."<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> C.G., 14.6.46.

<sup>103</sup> NUM Annual Conference Report, 1946.

Dying a fairly quiet death some six months later,<sup>105</sup> the campaign served only to illustrate just how desperate the Government and its advisers were becoming in their efforts to solve the coal problem and how orthodox was their choice of possible solutions. The miners appear to have taken it in their stride, motivated probably by a healthy scepticism for such campaigns and possibly by the kind of optimism which found expression in the Annual Report of the South Wales Production Committee in April 1946. It reminded the workforce that a "socialist government is an instrument to be used by the workers, and as such must be controlled by the workers. If, during the next five years, antagonism has brought about the failure of Nationalisation in the Mining Industry, and other Industries, the return of a reactionary Government is inevitable."<sup>106</sup>

There was obviously ample faith upon the coalfield that the new government was capable of instigating the great social and economic changes expected of it. This did not mean, however, that the miners were handing the Parliamentary Labour Party a blank cheque; the Report emphasised that the NUM "... must, and will, always function in the interests of its members who cannot become "Yes Men" or

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105 By the end of August, some 860 young miners - mostly Bevin-boy recruits - had been taken from the pits, because of their habitual absenteeism, and directed into the Forces. C.G., 6.9.46.

106 SWNUM Annual Conference Report, 1946; Production Committee Report.



Government Lackeys. It will perform the most important and efficient role in co-operation with the Government. It can at all times be critically constructive, and by its very nature wield sufficient power in collaboration with other Trade Unions in giving effect to its policies.

"Our Organisation will be compelled to become builders of the new Socialism. Efficient and determined in bringing about a complete re-organisation of a Unit that will guarantee the economic basis vital to the continuation of Socialism.

"Members should be warned that the only logical outcome of an anti-Labour Government policy is to create such tragic disunity that will result in a repetition of the disruptive experiences that destroyed many continental working-class organisations."<sup>107</sup>

Here was encapsulated the energy and vitality of the most optimistic section of the British Labour movement. These were not the words of men who consciously were setting out to reform an industry which would then provide a solid base upon which Labour could proceed to build a new capitalist economy. There is conveyed in the passage a sense of men determined to protect something which they considered precious and rare. These were men who had worked during the 1930s to reconstruct the union's "defences" that they might be used to

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107 Ibid.

build socialism; they were men who had witnessed the disarray and destruction of socialist movements on the continent and men who believed, in 1946, that they and their new government were ushering in the great socialist millenium.

Some two decades later, Horner was to recall that he and his union's membership had "had to realize that the Labour Government, while it did its best to make nationalisation of the mines a success, had no plan for socialism. They were," he wrote, "out to humanize Capitalism, not to change the system."<sup>108</sup>

If these were his feelings in 1946, he managed to disguise them very well. His contributions to the productivity drive showed little sign of diminishing. In August, for example, shortly after he had been elected General Secretary of the NUM, he told a Tonypany audience that production needs were then so great that the time had come to apply the slogan that "If a man won't work, neither shall he eat." The fact that a person had sufficient money to live on without having to work for wages, he said, should not entitle him to participate in commodities produced by the people, without his contributing to production."<sup>109</sup> And, although this speech was obviously directed mainly at the bourgeois elements of society, it was sufficiently

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<sup>108</sup> Horner, Incorrigible Rebel, pp.190-192.

<sup>109</sup> C.G., 30.8.46.

ambiguous to include as additional targets the so-called "slackers" whom he had attempted to root out of the industry earlier in the year. Like many others upon the NUM executive, Horner was exceedingly fond of equating industrial responsibility with moral responsibility. It was a fondness which reflected both the peculiar intensity of the support generated for the new government and the religiosity of the language used to express it. Thus, the leader of the Lancashire miners, John Hammond, spoke in Cardiff in *September 1946*, of the virtuousness of those great numbers of miners who were "steadfast and loyal workmen"; but, he added, there was evidence of a "lack of sense or moral obligation as in the case of a miner who told the pit production committee that he worked only four days a week because he could not manage on three."<sup>110</sup>

Despite a glut of such texts however, there were amongst the South Wales miners many who refused to be converted by these new versions of the old coalowners' orthodox remedies for commercial success. Serious strikes occurred during November at Blaenant Colliery in the Dulais Valley and at Ferndale in Rhondda Fach. Both were sparked-off by disagreements over the applications of price-lists and so serious was the Ferndale dispute that it escalated into a 36-hour stay-down involving some 34 colliers. Occurring, as both did, on the eve of nationalisation, these disputes served to re-emphasise that the possession of "moral responsibility"

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 29.9.46.

loyalty to the Labour Government and general political goodwill were not in themselves enough to compensate miners who found their wages and conditions insufficiently altered by the great political decisions being made around them. Such men looked forward to Vesting Day, not only with great anticipation, but also with a good deal of wariness and suspicion. They indicated, quite clearly, that they were not prepared to be fobbed off with high ideals, tight-fisted price lists and managerial pep-talks.